


FOLK TALES OF Kashmir



J. N. GANHAR



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J. N. GANHAR

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P r e f a c e

Kashmir is rich in folklore, especially folk tales. Here is a bouquet from the latter. These tales, old and not so old, have been told and retold countless number of times, and still continue to be relished by the people of the valley, young and old. They constitute, in a very real sense, the literature of the people, as folk tales are usually described.

Like folk tales elsewhere, the folk tales of Kashmir reflect the people's beliefs and traditions, customs and superstitions, preferences and prejudices in all their rich variety.

People, from the hoary past, have used the fascinating medium of story-telling to pass on the wisdom and experience of life from generation to generation. This is equally true about Kashmir and some of the stories have morals or lessons to convey, besides entertainment.

The stories though varied in theme and content, unmistakably bring out two characteristic features of a Kashmiri's outlook—his innate belief in the ultimate victory of goodness over evil and his faith that there is no difficulty or problem which cannot be overcome or solved with intelligence and diligence.

Story-telling, or rather listening to them, has come naturally to the people of Kashmir who for six long months in the year were cut off from the outside world and had little to do, especially in the dreary cold winter evenings. And the talented among them, whom a kindly nature had gifted with a lively imagination, not only produced their own stories but avidly caught at and made their own what others in the neighbouring territories had achieved in this field. A happy outcome of this we have in the eleventh century classic, *Katha Sarit Sagara* by Somadeva. With this "ocean of stories" the versatile Kashmiri

author tried to revive the spirits of a fond but foolish queen when she was completely disillusioned with her profligate son for whose sake she had made her husband renounce his throne.

Kashmiri's love of short stories and folk tales gave rise to a class of professional story-tellers who were known as *chetagar* and in more recent times as *dastan-go*. They would regale assembled audiences on festive occasions and at harvest time with the longer folk tales recited in prose and verse. It was from one such story-teller that great antiquary, Dr. Aurel Stein, learnt the folk tales which he has presented to the world as *Hatim's Tales*.

The folk tales of Kashmir have regaled the people of Kashmir for generations. The present publication is an endeavour to bring them within the reach of a wider audience.

In conclusion I must acknowledge my gratitude to my brother, 'Babuji' with whom I have discussed the plan and contents of the book again and again and who has made many valuable suggestions. Thanks are also due to Mr. Abdul Razak, Chief Librarian, Sri Pratap Singh Public Library, Srinagar, and to my nephews, Jawaharlal Koul and Bharat Bushan Vuthoo for their assistance unflinchingly rendered.

J. N. Ganhar

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THE FEAST OF SHIRAZ

Once a resident of Shiraz decided to visit some of the famous cities in lands around his native land, Iran. Luckily he had a number of friends in these countries, having picked up friendship with them during common pilgrimages to the holy cities like Mecca and Medina. One of his friends was in Kashmir

and the Shirazi decided to visit him first.

The Kashmiris are known for their hospitality and when the man from Shiraz appeared at the doorstep of his Kashmiri friend, the latter was very happy. He accorded him a very warm welcome and lodged



The feet of the guest from Shiraz were washed in hot water to remove the fatigue of the journey

him in the best room in his house. He was treated to a hot cup of *Kahwa* (sugared tea without milk) In the evening his feet were washed in hot water to remove the fatigue of the long, arduous journey.

The Kashmiri wanted his friend from Shiraz to give him the pleasure of his company for a number of days. But this the Shirazi was reluctant to do as he had to visit many places. He, however, agreed to stay with his Kashmiri friend for three days.

As the two friends were conversing, there came in a steaming hot meal comprising rice and a few meat dishes for which Kashmir has always been famous.

The two friends had their meal and talked about sundry things. But not a word of praise was uttered by the guest about the quality of the meal. The host was disappointed. He had expected appreciation, or at any rate, an expression of approval, from the guest. But there was none of it. On the contrary, when the meal



"Hai, Dawat-i-Shiraj"

was over, the man from Shiraz exclaimed : "*Hai; Dawat-i-Shiraz !*" ("Oh, the feast of Shiraz !").

The Kashmiri was very unhappy. He could not sleep at night. But he was not one to be easily outdone. He planned a still better repast for his friend next evening. He, therefore, called the cook early in the morning and gave him elaborate instructions about the evening meal. He promised his cook a *bakshish*, if the meal prepared by him drew the guest's praise. But this was not to be. He still considered a *Shirazi* feast superior. For at the end of the meal he again exclaimed, "*Hai, Dawat-i-Shiraz!*" This was too much for the Kashmiri host. But he was not the man to yield ground so easily. He was proud of his country's *wazwan* (meat preparations). The visitor from Shiraz had one more day to spend with him. He would not let go this opportunity to draw praise from the guest from Shiraz. He, therefore, decided to treat him to a still better feast on the last day of his stay with him. He called in another cook, who enjoyed a high reputation for his culinary skill, related to him what had happened, and asked him to prepare a meal which would not only draw the Shirazi's appreciation but which he would remember all his life. He promised

him a high reward if he faced this challenge successfully.

The new cook did all he could to make the dinner the best of his long career. He had the choicest meat and spices brought by his employer who was lavish with his money to vindicate the reputation of Kashmiri's culinary skill, but all in vain. For, at the end of the dinner the man from Shiraz once again exclaimed : "Oh ! the feast of Shiraz !" In other words, he still regarded his country's feasts superior to the ones his Kashmiri friend treated him to.

The Kashmiri host became very curious to know what a Shirazi feast was like. He, therefore, decided to go on a holy pilgrimage next year and on the return journey call on his friend in Shiraz.

In Shiraz the Kashmiri had not much difficulty in finding the house of his friend, who was a man of consequence in his country. He was very happy to see his friend from Kashmir and extended a most cordial welcome to him. He embraced him warmly and expressed the wish that his friend from Kashmir would spend at least a month with him. This, however, the guest from Kashmir could not agree to, though he promised to remain

in the reputed Iranian town for a few days. The man from Kashmir was lodged in a decent airy room and a servant placed at his disposal.

After ablutions and prayers, the guest sat down to smoke the pipe of friendship and peace, while dinner was being prepared. He waited with much expectation and curiosity to see what kind of dinner it would be, for the Shirazi had been so loud in its praise when he was in Kashmir. But his expectations were sadly belied when the dinner was actually served.

The dinner comprised a mere heapful of boiled rice with just a simple dish of meat and some vegetables. He waited expectantly for something more to come but nothing came and the Kashmiri took what was offered and went to bed, for he was tired from the day's journey.

Next morning when he awoke, he remembered what he had taken last night and how ill it compared with what had been served to his Shirazi friend in his house in Kashmir. He was, however, in a mood to excuse his friend. He thought that as he had arrived late and without notice, his friend could perhaps not make proper

arrangements for his meal. He, therefore, waited for dinner in the evening. He expected a grand feast on the second day of his stay in his Shirazi friend's house. But great was his surprise and chagrin when the same kind of dinner was served at nightfall. The fare was no better on the third day. He was bitter and could contain himself no longer. He reminded his host of how loquacious he had been of the "*Dawat-i-Shiraz*" when he was in Kashmir and asked if it comprised just a heapful of cooked rice and a few simple meat and vegetable dishes.

The man of Shiraz was not at all dismayed or ashamed. He replied, "Yes, brother, it is just this and no more". He went on to add, "We here in Shiraz are plain folk, given to taking simple homely fare. The feasts you gave in my honour in Kashmir could, at the most, be for a few days only. One cannot afford such luxury every day. For that would not only deplete the pocket of the host but would also impair, beyond recovery, the stomach of the guest—a result most unpleasant to both in the long run. Hence my remarks at the end of your grand feasts, of which, I hope you will now realise the truth".

ROBBERS ROBBED

There once was a wise king who through his wisdom and diligence became very wealthy and powerful. He defeated in battle all the neighbouring potentates. His wealth and power were the envy of his contemporaries.

But as it usually happens, his successes and wealth made him complacent and conceited. With the neighbouring kings paying tribute, he thought himself invincible and neglected his administration and the army.

One of the rulers who had suffered defeat at his hands was very sore about it. He lay in wait for an opportunity to avenge his defeat. He carefully prepared for a trial of strength with his adversary and when he felt sufficiently strong, he launched an attack on his overlord.

The armies of the two kings met on a broad open plain with the two

rulers personally in command of their respective forces. The two armies were so evenly balanced that for some time it was difficult to say which side would win. But ultimately the proud, indolent king was slain and his army routed. His adversary incorporated his territory into his own and began to rule from the capital of the conquered territory.

To make himself fully secure on the new throne, the new king took a number of measures. One of the very first among these was to banish the widowed queen and her two sons.

This was too hard on the princes and their mother who had lived in royal plenitude and luxury. But the widowed queen was a brave woman. She would not beg, nor would she allow her children to do so in the land of their exile even though hardly any one knew them

there. She decided to work to earn her own and her sons' keep. She decided to pound paddy for people. This got her some rice and a little cash. She sent the elder of her two sons to the nearby jungle to get a bundle or two of firewood daily. The other child did some odd jobs nearer home and only occasionally

accompanied his brother to the forest.

One day when the elder prince was engaged in cutting wood in the forest, he saw a number of loaded camels and mules, accompanied by several men, coming in his direction. He put down his axe and stood still to watch



He was terribly frightened and ran up a tree

the approaching caravan. It did not take him long to understand that it was a party of thieves travelling with their booty laden on camels and ponies. He was terribly frightened and ran up a tree whose thick foliage afforded him cover.

The caravan halted before a hut not far from the spot where the wood cutter lay hidden. The robbers unloaded their beasts and put all the bundles, they carried, inside the hut. A very curious thing that he noticed was that the door of the hut opened and shut at the mention of a charm. He carefully noted the words of the charm, and when the robbers had gone away, he went to the hut and uttered the charm. The door of the hut immediately flung open and no sooner had he got in than it shut of itself again. Inside he saw that the robbers had stored a vast treasure. There was gold and silver, jewels and precious stones and many other costly articles.

It so happened that the robbers had left one of their slightly wounded camels near the hut. The young prince brought the animal and loaded upon him as much treasure as the beast could carry, and then he returned to his mother.

The poor woman, who with her two children was passing her days in great misery, was very happy to see what her son had got. But she was also very apprehensive. Her misgivings and fears were, however, set at rest when her son told her how he had got the treasure. When the younger prince came in the evening and saw what his elder brother had got, he too was mightily pleased. He made anxious inquiries from his mother and his brother about how the latter had managed to get all this treasure. When he learnt how his brother had done so he was thrilled. He too decided to go to the jungle to try his luck.

Next morning he woke up earlier than usual, had a hasty cup of tea and a loaf of bread, and left for the jungle with a little *sattu* in his bag. Inside the forest he climbed the tree next to the robbers' hut and hid himself in its leaves. He had not long to wait for the robbers to come. They arrived soon, carrying before them a number of heavily packed camels and mules. One of the robbers—obviously the leader of the team—quickly alighted from his horse, went to the door of the hut and uttered the charm. The door at once opened. He went in followed by some of the other

thieves. But they were stunned to find most of the valuables missing. They understood that some one had entered the hut in their absence and carried away their treasure. They cursed the thief and vowed terrible vengeance against him. The young prince who was a witness to all their oaths and abuses, trembled with fear and felt sorry that he should at all have embarked upon his hazardous task.

He remained on the tree till the robbers went away. When they were well out of sight, he descended, went to the hut and uttered the charm. The door opened at once and he entered. He found that the robbers had once again filled the hut with rich treasure. He considered himself lucky and decided to go out to load it on some beast or the other that he might find in the jungle. But the door was shut. He uttered the charm. But the door would not open. He repeated the words of the charm again and again but to no avail. The door remained closely shut. He kicked against it with all his strength but the door did not yield. Apparently he had forgotten some word in the charm or mispronounced some word in it. He knew what his fate would be when the robbers returned. He, therefore, shouted and begged for

the door to be opened but who was going to oblige him in that out of the way place. Exhausted, he lay down. He knew that the robbers would cut him into pieces when they returned. And this they did when soon after they came with their newly collected booty. There was much rejoicing and merry-making in the robber's camp for having discovered the thief. In the morning they left on their marauding mission once again.

When the young boy did not return home in the evening, his mother and elder brother became very anxious and apprehensive. The latter went to the jungle next day. He was stunned to find pieces of his brother's body strewn all over the place—obviously to frighten others who might be tempted to follow in his footsteps. He went into the hut and found it full of fresh treasure deposited by the robbers since his last visit. He decided to teach them a lesson. He put some of the most valuable articles in the hut in a bag. He collected the pieces of his brother's body strewn all over the place in another bag, and slinging the two over his shoulders, he quickly rode back home.

The poor mother was overwhelmed to hear of the cruel fate that had overtaken her beloved child.

But she was very wise and careful and had his parts buried quickly and secretly lest the burial should arouse any curiosity or suspicion.

When the robbers returned to the hut in the jungle in the evening they were surprised that there was not a single piece of flesh or bone of the miscreant whom they had cut into bits only fortyeight hours ago. But their surprise was much greater when on entering the hut they found missing some more precious articles deposited by them on their last visit. This, the robbers rightly argued, showed that the person whom they had done to death, was not the real or the only thief. The real thief was some other. They vowed terrible revenge against him and resolved, on oath, not to rest till they had traced him.

The robbers cried a halt to their thieving activities and set about tracing the thief in right earnest. They went to the towns flanking the forest but without fruit. In the evening they returned to the hut in the jungle and took counsel about what should be done. The surest way to find the thief, they decided, was to find out who had grown rich overnight in the town next to the jungle.

They went to the city and roamed the streets and bye-lanes

again and again. But they could hardly locate the thief in this way. The leader of the robbers' team therefore tried to make friends with a tailor and asked him if there was anyone living in the vicinity who had suddenly grown rich. The tailor could not say exactly but he had made the burial clothes for someone who, it was stated, had been brutally slaughtered by some robbers. It was believed that the widowed mother of the deceased had suddenly come by a lot of wealth. But how she got it, he could not say.

The robbers' chief understood that the widow's house was the place where the real thief lived. He located it and put a mark on its door, so he could easily spot it on return after he had conveyed to his companions the information that he had collected about the real thief.

When the prince returned home and found the house-door peculiarly marked, his apprehensions were aroused. He took counsel with his mother and the two of them agreed that the robbers had probably found out who had stolen away their valuables and they would kill them sooner or later. But the queen was a very intelligent woman. She asked her son to go out and

put a similar mark on as many neighbouring houses as he could.

The prince did as his mother bid him and when the robbers returned to take revenge upon their enemy they were non-plussed to find so many houses bearing the same mark which the robber-chief had put on the house of the exiled queen and her son.

But the robbers' chief was also a clever person. He again went to the tailor, with whom he had become friendly, and through him got acquainted with the prince. He cultivated the prince as-

siduously and won his friendship. So much so that he had easy admittance into their house. He was on the lookout for an opportunity to behead the prince, and one day went into the house with a dagger concealed beneath his coat. The widowed queen fortunately noticed it. She at once understood that her son's friend was no friend but an enemy and from his talk and behaviour she came to the conclusion that he was the robber who was out to kill her son. She, therefore, decided to finish him off before he killed her son.



She Sang and danced most wonderfully

Accordingly she decided to entertain her son's friend, who was always a welcome guest in her house, to a sword dance.

The widowed queen was an adept in handling a sword. She sang and danced most wonderfully and as the guest was nodding his head in appreciation of her performance she struck it off with a carefully delivered thrust of the sword. The young prince was horrified when he saw his friend's head chopped off by his mother.

"Oh mother ! what have you done ?" he said. The mother said in reply, "I have simply exchanged places. He was going to murder you. But instead of allowing him to do that, I have put an end to him".

To convince her son, she lifted a flap of the robber's coat to uncover the dagger that he was carrying. "This must be one of the robbers come to murder me for taking away their treasure. Dear mother ! you have indeed given me a second birth. How can I thank you !" said the prince.

When the robbers came to know about the death of their leader they were terribly frustrated. They divided among themselves whatever remained of their booty and went back to their different villages. The prince married and became a banker. With the wise counsel and guidance of his mother, he prospered wonderfully.

DEVIL OUTWITTED

Sona was a handsome young peasant. He was well-built, intelligent and industrious. But he had no land of his own. He worked on several farms to earn his living. In this he was helped by his wife, Sundari, who also was handsome, energetic and intelligent. She was a great asset to her hardworking husband and considerably lightened his burden.

Sona and Sundari led a happy, contented life. Though by no means affluent, they were never in want, as through his industry and intelligence, Sona made the farms he worked on yield bumper crops which in turn increased his own share of the yield. Sundari was a devoted wife and made the best of what her husband was able to get through his hard labour. In fact she laid by something against the rainy day also.

Those were the days when piped water supply was unknown, especially in the villages. The villagers had to rely on springs and streams for their drinking water. The village women got water from these in *gharas* (earthenware pitchers) and as they needed one another's help in lifting the pots and placing them on the head—sometimes one upon the other—they went together to the river or spring to carry out this essential domestic chore. It also afforded them a welcome opportunity to gossip and exchange notes about men and events.

One day when Sundari was returning—two pitchers on her head—with the other village women, she was insulted by the wife of an idle, rich *zamindar*. Since Sundari and her husband were in no way dependent on any one else, she felt herself equal to any other woman

in the village and talked with them as an equal. But this was not to the liking of some of the other women whose husbands owned

large tracts of land. One of them referred to Sundari as the wife of a landless beggar.



Sundari burst into tears

This was too much for the village belle and as she entered her modest dwelling and put the pitchers down, she burst into tears. When Sona found out the cause for her sorrow, he was also deeply hurt by the insult and promised his wife that he would definitely get her a piece of land before the year was out. But Sundari was not disposed to believe him for she knew how little they had to purchase a piece of farm land.

Sona, as we already know, was an intelligent youth. He knew that if there was one man who could get him a piece of land, it was the village *patwari*. Taking a small bag full of rice of the best quality, he approached the *patwari* one day, and requested him to get him a piece of land. He promised adequate *khidmat* (service) in return if he obliged him.

The *patwari* was happy with the peasant who got him some choice rice and had promised him more if he got him a piece of land. The *patwari* promised Sona a strip of boulder strewn land on the outskirts of the village which was entered as 'barren land' in the revenue records.

Sona was very happy when the *patwari* gave him possession of the land. Sundari was beside herself with joy when she came to know about it and saw it. True, it was boulder strewn but both she and her husband were young and energetic. They would work hard and make it fit for farming. And this they did in a few days' time and started preparations for sowing.

One day late in the evening when Sona was returning home from the newly acquired farm, a fat hen with a brood of chicks crossed his path. They blocked his passage, obliging him to go from one side to the other. In this way he was led astray from his path. And when the hen and the chicks disappeared there came a large number of ewes who were even more obstructionist. The result was that the poor fellow was pushed far away from his real path. He walked for a long time over uneven ground, suffering many a fall. His trousers were rent and his legs and feet were bruised by thorny bushes and brambles. At long last he came across three or four persons who had a lantern with them. He was glad to see them and told them of his predicament. They told him that he

had been waylaid by the Devil and had strayed far from his path. They put him on the correct track and led him part of the way back to his home.

Next evening when he started for his home from the farm, the Devil once again tried to harass him by setting up obstructions in his path. But as the good way-



The devil himself appeared before him

farers, who correctly led him yesterday, had advised him, he had brought a knife with him and this he stuck into the ground. The obstructions at once vanished and instead the Devil himself appeared before him in the guise of a man but with his eyes on his head and his feet pointing backwards.

Sona at once understood who the visitant was and did not lose his poise or composure. He politely, but confidently, addressed him, "Who may you be, Sir, and what can I do for you?"

The Devil replied, "You have been misbehaving by cultivating my farm".

"But, Sir, the local *patwari* has allotted it to me," said the farmer.

"To hell with the *patwari*; he is an unscrupulous fellow who will do anything for a little money," said the Devil.

Sona, who had developed the piece of barren land with sweated labour, was loth to give it up. But it would be little use picking up a quarrel with the Devil. He, therefore, adopted a conciliatory tone and submitted, "Sir, I have been tilling people's lands all my life. Give this humble servant of yours the privilege of tilling yours also".

The Devil was flattered by Sona's proposition put forward so respectfully, and gave his approval.

Sona expressed his gratitude and said, "What rent may it please your Honour to have?"

"The same as the other tenants pay, fifty-fifty", said the Devil.

"Would you like to have the upper half or the lower half of the crop?" the intelligent farmer asked.

"The upper half", the Devil said non-chalantly and walked away.

Sona returned home and told his wife about his encounter with the Devil. They took counsel with each other and decided to grow turnips on the farm.

The Devil occasionally visited the farm and was glad to see how well the turnips were coming up. He looked forward to getting his share of the crop, from what till recently was but an unproductive barren tract of land.

When the turnips were fully grown, Sona and Sundari came with sickles and baskets and cut off the green leaves and heaped them up for the Devil. They then dug out the turnips and took them to the market for sale. When the Devil came Sona, with folded hands, offered him the leaves that had been put together in a heap. The Devil had hoped to make some money from what was grown on

his farm. But the leaves soon turned yellow and became useless. He had asked for the upper half of the crop and had, therefore, only himself to blame.

Before beginning the sowing operations next cropping season, Sona went to the Devil and most respectfully said to him "What part of the crop may it please your Honour to have this time?"

"Of course, the lower half", said the Devil in a tone of authority.

Sona reported the matter to his wife and the two of them decided to raise a crop of barley on their farm.

The Devil occasionally visited the farm and was glad to find it filling up with a thick green crop. His heart was delighted when he found it waving with the wind. He thought he would soon be able to make a good bit of money, and that through labour not his own.

When the green crop turned golden and was harvested, Sona took the upper half with all the grain and left the lower half of the stalks and the roots for the Devil. The Devil was sorely discomfited when he was called upon to take his share of the crop. He felt that

he had been duped but put a bold face on the whole affair. He did not give any impression of dismay or sorrow or that he had been duped by the clever crafty farmer but resolved, in his mind, to teach the rogue a lesson.

Next time when the farmer approached the Devil to find out what part of the crop he would like to have, the latter quickly said that he would have the both upper and lower half of the plants, leaving only the middle portion to the farmer.

Sona once again took counsel with Sundari and it was decided to raise maize on the farm this time. The Devil was greatly pleased to see the crop coming up thick and tall whenever he happened to pass by the farm. When it was fully grown, Sona and his wife went to the farm with sickles and bags. They left the lofty crowns and roots for the Devil and themselves took away the middle stalks with the luscious cobs on them. When the Devil came to collect his share, he felt that he had again made a fool of himself. He, therefore, decided to give the farm to the wretched farmer Sona, who profoundly thanked him for the valuable gift.

MAHARAJA OUTWITTED

The Maharaja's new palace was under construction. Scores of masons, carpenters and labourers were at work day and night to erect it in time for the marriage ceremony of the heir-apparent. Two overseers were appointed to supervise the construction and ensure that there was no pilferage of costly building materials.

One of the overseers was a real crook and managed to steal a lot of material. But he did it so cleverly that none of the workers had any inkling of it. The pilferage could not remain hidden for long from the Maharaja who was a very intelligent ruler, but which of the two overseers was guilty could not be easily ascertained as no clue to how the materials disappeared was at all available.

The Maharaja, therefore, ordered both the overseers to be put in prison and to deny them food

and drink for twenty-four hours. He, however, had two tins partially filled with *ladoos* put in the two prison cells in which the suspects were lodged, with instructions not to partake of their sweet contents.

As time passed, the two overseers became hungry. But they would not take the *ladoos* for the one who took them would be regarded as the person responsible for the theft of the building materials.

As the hours sped, the two prison inmates got famished. They could resist the temptation to take the *ladoos* only out of fear of being held responsible of the theft. The crook, however, hit upon a stratagem. He occasionally took up the tin container containing the *ladoos* and shook it. In this way, while the number of the *ladoos* remained the same, small bits of them came off. These he took to



The crook occasionally took up the tin of ladoos and shook it

satisfy his hunger. The other Overseer, who was innocent, thought that his colleague had started taking the *ladoos* and, therefore, took one every time that he heard a shaking of the tin in the other room, separated by a thin wall.

At the end of the ordeal the two

overseers were led into the presence of the Maharaja along with their tins. But the thief went scot-free for the *ladoos* in his tin were found to be the same in number, as before, while the innocent overseer who had eaten some of the sweets was held to be guilty and punished.

GOD OUTWITTED

There once lived a stingy miser. He not only wanted to get more and more for himself and hoard it, but he was consumed by jealousy if fortune smiled on any one of his neighbours. His neighbours' affluence gave him sleepless nights during which he would curse himself for his ill luck.

The people in his locality were men of good disposition, given to deeds of piety and helpfulness to fellow beings. They offered prayers and went to places of worship regularly. They also gave a lot in charity to mendicants and the destitute. Their good nature was rewarded by the Almighty with ever-increasing prosperity. This set the miser's heart ablaze and he wondered as to what it was that brought them their good luck.

After pondering over the matter for long the miser came to the conclusion that his neighbours'

good fortune was the results of their piety and prayers. He, therefore, resolved to do the same. He began to offer prayers regularly and went to temples and *tirthas*. To acquire greater merit (and in consonance with his stingy nature) he made the pilgrimages on foot. He also visited the various *ashrams* and hermitages to offer obeisance to sages and savants lodged in them. He often kept fasts and recited the holy scriptures.

God was pleased with the miser's piety and penance and appearing to him one day, said, "O, my devotee. I am pleased with you. Name whatever boon you would like to have and it will instantly be granted to you".

The miser was mightily pleased and was about to express his heart's desire for unbounded riches, when the Almighty intervened to

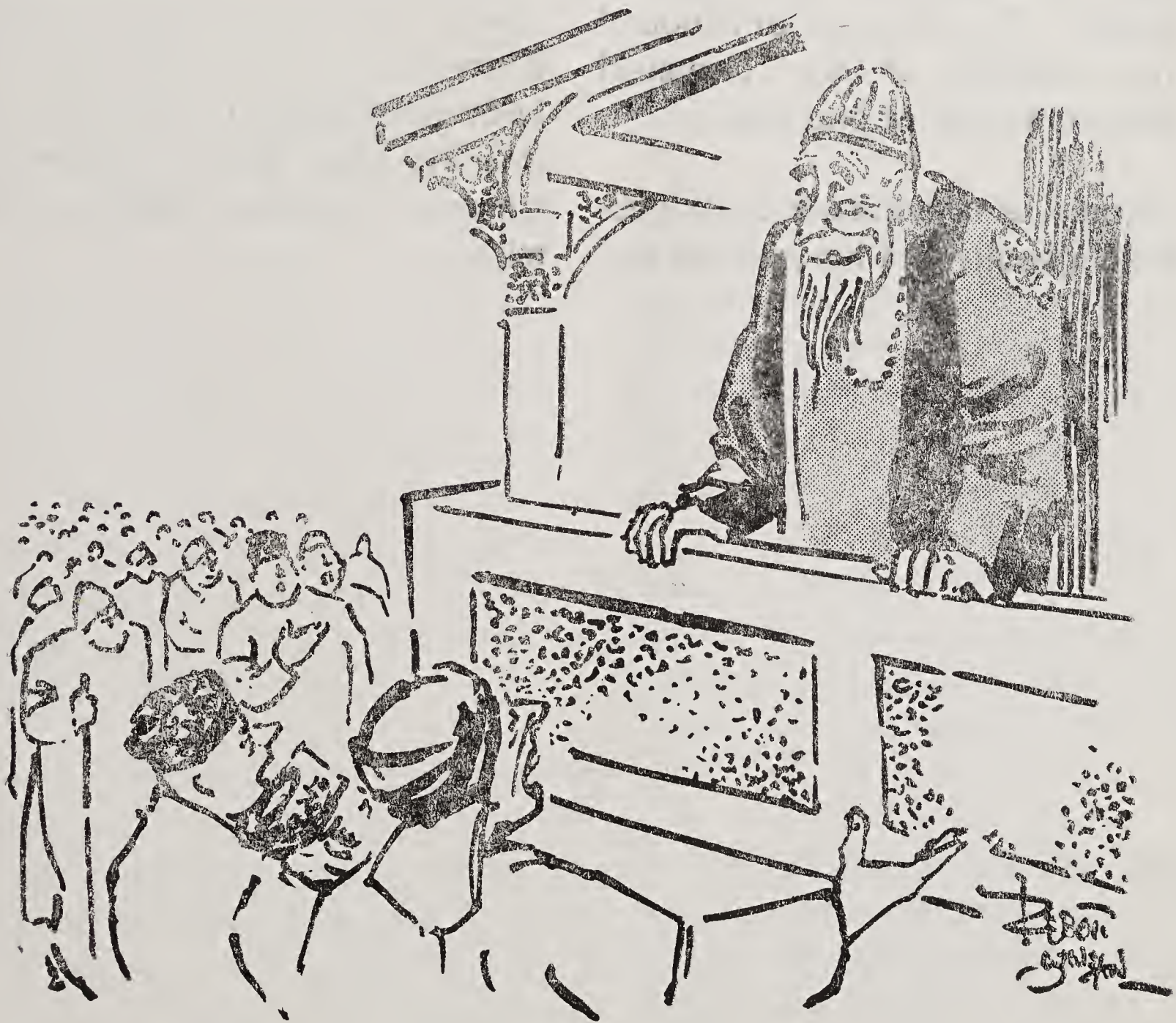
say, "But, my devotee, there is one condition".

The miser who was growing impatient to receive the promised boon, said, "Lord, what is it?"

God said, "The condition is that your neighbours will get twice as much as you ask for yourself".

This was not what the miser had bargained for. All his prayers and penance were not undertaken to

make his hated neighbours, already rich enough, richer still. But he realised that it is not easy to make God appear to oneself again and again. This is a favour granted to but few among millions in hundreds of years. It would be most indiscreet to miss this chance. He, therefore, supplicated God, "Almighty, give me a day's time to decide. I will make my submission tomorrow." God granted his request.



The miser was gloating over his success

At night the miser gave the whole matter a good think. He hit upon a stratagem and when, on the morrow, God appeared to him once again at the appointed hour, he said to Him, "Almighty, Your condition is acceptable to me".

"Name then your heart's desire and it will be granted instantly", God said.

The miser, in measured tones, said, "O, Almighty. The Giver of Boons! The Bestower of Favours! The Sustainer of the Universe! Make me blind of one eye".

God was taken aback at the miser's ingenuity and his jealousy and

hatred of his neighbours. But a divine promise once given must be redeemed. So the miser at once became blind of one eye while all the other people in the locality lost sight in both their eyes.

This was an unforeseen calamity and the miser's neighbours wondered what had brought them this tragic misfortune. Meanwhile the miser was gloating over his success. In course of time the news of the miser's clever stratagem spread like wild-fire and his neighbours flocked to his residence in a body and begged of him to restore their eye sight. They promised to surrender all their wealth to the miser.

WISE CROW

"Caw", "Caw", "Caw", shouted the crow as it flew into the spacious hall in which the Governor was holding a ceremonial *darbar*. The peons in attendance at once chased it away. But it came in again soon after, shouting "Caw", "caw", "caw", louder than before. The peons now swung into action with long poles and the crying bird was shunted out. But it came in again, with its ear-piercing cries of "caw", "caw", "caw".

As the attendant peons were about to wield their poles again to scare away the cawing crow, the Governor told them not to drive it away. "Evidently it has a petition," he said, and ordered one of the subordinate functionaries, to

go and find out what it was.

The bird seemed to understand what the Governor said and it also left with the official and flew over his head, cawing gently. It led him to the end of a spacious *maidan* (ground) where a wood cutter was busy chopping a tall poplar tree. The crow descended upon a branch of the tree. A brood of chicks in a nest on the branch raised a lot of noise as the parent bird dropped into the nest.

The official sent by the Governor understood why the crow had flown into the conference room again and again. He at once ordered the wood cutter to stop



The official at once asked the wood cutter to stop

cutting the tree, and returned to tell the Governor so. The Governor was happy to know that timely action had saved the poor bird's nest from being destroyed and its

chicks from being rendered homeless.

The whole assemblage was full of praise for the Governor's wisdom.

SAGACIOUS GOVERNOR

Nature has blessed Kashmir with meadows and grass lands in profusion and it has been customary with the people to send their animals, when not in milk, to the grassy hill slopes and glades to graze in summer. This enabled their owners to save some money while at the same time enabling their animals to have the best that kindly nature has so bountifully provided for them.

It so happened that two neighbours in the same village had entrusted their mares to the same shepherd for grazing during summer months. Both of them were pregnant when they were taken to the forest meadows to graze. And they gave birth to two foals about the same time. But one of the foals was still-born. The two mares therefore mothered the same offspring. Both suckled it and fondled it in their own way.

The shepherd was not present when the two mares gave birth to their offspring. So he could not say whose child the living foal was. Each one of the owners claimed the living foal to be his mare's. The poor shepherd was at a loss to know what to do. He therefore suggested to the owners of the two mares that all the three of them would go to the Governor, who enjoyed a high reputation for his judicial acumen ever since he had saved the crow's nest on the tall poplar tree, for a decision in the matter. The other two readily agreed.

The Governor was at first baffled when he heard the case. But he did not take long to prescribe a course to trace the rightful owner of the living foal.

The Governor had the two mares and the foal taken to the riverside and had the foal put in



One of the mares plunged into the gushing river.

an open boat which he ordered to be rowed to the other bank of the river.

As the boat left the bank on which were standing the Governor, the shepherd, the two mares and their owners, one of the mares at

once plunged into the gushing river while the other continued to be where she was. Everybody present at once understood that the mare who dared into the river was the real mother. The living foal was therefore handed over to its lawful owner. Everybody was full of praise for the Governor.

CLEVER PARROT

There once lived a *faqir* who had a clever, talkative parrot as a pet. The medicant loved and valued the bird. The parrot would regale the *faqir* on return from his daily rounds with a lot of talk and some news. One day when the *faqir* was not well and somewhat depressed in mood, he said to the parrot, "Why are you so quiet today ? Have you no news to convey ?"

The parrot said, "Master ! I thought you are not well and therefore did not want to bother you, especially as I had not anything special to convey. From tomorrow I will relate to you faithfully whatever of interest takes place in the house during your absence."

The *faqir* had to go to a distant town on the morrow. He got up early in the morning and handed over to his wife a fat fowl. He said to her : "Cook it for the lunch. But if I am late, take half of

it yourself and leave the other half for me."

But the fowl when cooked tasted so delicious that the *faqir's* wife could not resist eating the whole of it. In the evening when the *faqir* returned his wife told him a lie. She said to him that the other half of the fowl had been eaten by the cat.

The poor *faqir* who had been looking forward to a tasty meal was sadly disappointed to know what had happened. As he was very hungry, he asked his wife to prepare something else. When she went into the kitchen, the *faqir* called the parrot near him. He said to it, "O, my sweet bird ! What's the news ?" The parrot said, "Your wife has told you a lie. She ate the whole of the fowl. I saw it with my own eyes."

The wife vehemently denied what the parrot said. In order to



"Your wife has told you a lie."

keep the peace *faqir* who was a man of experience, pretended to believe his wife. But the woman always felt guilty whenever she was with

her husband and the parrot was near. Her guilt lay heavy on her conscience. She therefore wanted to be rid of the bird who had

exposed her. She lay in wait for an early opportunity to do so.

One day when she found her husband in a very pleasant and happy mood, she said to him,

"We had better be separated, for the parrot is everything to you now and I am nothing. You believe its word in preference to mine. You like it more than me. I can bear it no longer. Either send me or the parrot away, for all the three of us cannot live in the same house."

The *faqir* loved the bird no doubt, but he was married to his wife and would not forsake her easily. He therefore decided, though very reluctantly, to do away with the parrot.

Next morning, taking his parrot in a cage, he rode his mare and went out to sell the bird. He rode far till he reached the edge of the land adjoining the sea. He felt very tired and wanted to rest a while. But he was afraid lest the bird or he beast should run away while the lay asleep.

The bird, who was very intelligent and faithful, understood what its master was thinking. It said to him, "Master, don't feel worried. Have a nap all right. Only let me

out of the cage. I will fly to the yonder tree and keep watch over you and the mare, I won't run away, take my word for it."

The *faqir* slept and the parrot kept watch over him and the mare. When he woke up he called the bird back into the cage, rode the mare and resumed the journey. He reached the city where he intended to sell the parrot. The first to meet him here was the *Kotwal*¹. He said to the visitor: "What a fine bird you have ! Would you like to sell it ?".

The *faqir* said, "Yes, I will sell it, if I get the price for it."

But the parrot broke in, "You can't buy me." "No!" the *Kotwal* replied, "I want to have you for my *wazir*². He wants such a bird."

Taking the cage in hand, the *faqir* accompanied the *Kotwal* to the *wazir's kothi*³.

The *wazir* was wonderstruck to see such a gifted bird. But he felt that the king would be offended if he acquired such a wonderful creature without so much as informing him. So he decided to take it to his master.

The *Kotwal*, the *faqir* and the

1. Police Chief 2. Chief Minister 3. Residence

parrot then went to the palace. The King too was pleased to see the bird. He asked the *faqir* its price. But without waiting for its owner to answer, the parrot said, "Ten thousand rupees."

The king was very happy to see the bird speaking like a human being. He at once had the sum brought from his treasury and handed it over to the *faqir*.

The bird was very well looked after in the palace. It was placed in a silver cage where food and drink were served in golden vessels. The cage itself was hung in the *zennana*¹, so that the king's queen and other women could enjoy the bird's wonderful plumage and its sweet prattle. The bird became a great favourite with king's wives. One day, in a playful mood, the ladies asked the parrot to give its opinion of themselves. The bird readily said that they were good and pretty except the chief queen who, it said, had the face of a sow. This was too much for the chief queen who was the king's favourite and she fell down in a swoon.

The king was at once sent for. The chief queen had revived by the time he arrived. But she was furious against the parrot. She asked her husband to get it killed

and have its flesh served to her. The king was very sorry to hear this. He loved the parrot but he loved his favourite wife much more. Therefore he ordered the parrot to be killed.

The parrot pleaded with the king not to kill it. But finding him adamant it asked for six day's lease before it was slain. It also sought permission to wander about where it chose to and promised to be back after six days to comply with the king's verdict.

The king agreed, knowing that the bird was a creature that scrupulously kept its word. As the parrot took its master's leave it came across a large group of parrots who were on their way to a distant island where, they informed the condemned bird, a princess of incomparable beauty fed them with pearls and candy. They invited it to accompany them, which it willingly did. After the feast was over, the king's parrot feigned illness and lay on the ground.

"What is the matter with you, pretty bird?" asked the princess when she came to know about its illness, "What is the matter? Are you ill? Come along with me. I will look after you and you shall be all

¹. Ladies' apartment

right soon," said the princees. She took the parrot to the palace, made

a cosy little nest for it, and looked after it herself. She gave the bird



"What is the matter with you, pretty bird ?", asked the princess

many pearls and much candy; but the parrot pretended to care for none of these things.

"O princess," it said, "You are kind and good. You give us pearls and candy. But my master, the great king whose dominions extend on all sides, and includes this island also, scatters pearls and candy before fowls. O, that you were married to him and he was married to you. You are both so eminently suited to be man and wife.

The parrot's words inspired love in the heart of the princess and she suggested to her father, she would like to pay a visit to the king about whose merits the parrot was so eloquent. but the father could hardly concede this wish of a grown-up girl. Instead, he offered to write to the king and he did so. In this letter he asked the great king to come personally on a particular day for marriage.

The princess agreed and the bird was immediately despatched to his master with the letter. Just before the close of the fifth day the parrot flew in the presence of the king and dropped the letter.

"You have arrived in good time," said His Majesty. "You know my verdict against you has to be

carried out tomorrow," he added.

The parrot beseeched the king not to kill it. He said, "I have done you no harm; nor to any of the inmates of your royal household. The women of your harem asked me to say what I thought of them and I answered them honestly and plainly. I spoke no untruth. But the chief queen unnecessarily got angry. But I trust, you will not have me killed to satisfy her mere whim. Her life does not depend on me in any way. She will not die if I continue to live. And if it was otherwise, I would get you a far better and prettier princess as your wife in her stead." The bird handed over to the king the letter he had got from the ruler of the island he had visited in the company of a group of parrots. It said, "Here is a letter I have got for you from the father of the most lovely princess now living. He has sought your acceptance of the hand of his daughter in marriage."

The king was not unaware of the handsome princess of the island kingdom. Like the perfume of a fragrant flower, her fame had spread far and wide. The king was mighty glad at the prospect of marrying this gifted girl. He therefore said to the parrot, "You are a good bird who has always spoken fairly and acted honestly. I will not

slay you. I accept the proposal of the ruler of the Island and agree to marry his accomplished daughter."

The parrot was happy that it has succeeded in saving its life. It at once departed and went to the island to inform the princess and her father about the king's acceptance of the marriage proposal. An early date was fixed for the marriage.

The bird then returned to its Master and on the appointed day, the king with a small but trusted retinue came to the island and the marriage took place.

The king was highly satisfied with his new wife and made her the chief queen. The parrot was glad that it had not only saved its own life but had taught the former haughty and cruel queen a lesson.

WHY THE FISH LAUGHED

The queen was fond of fish and one day when a fisher-woman passed by the palace crying her fish, the king's favourite wife had her brought in to see what she

had for sale.

The fisherwoman turned the fishes in the trough in which she was carrying them to enable the queen to see them all and make



"Is it a male or a female fish ?"

her choice. A big fish which jumped about in the bottom of the trough, caught the queen's attention. She wanted to purchase it, but before doing so, she said to the fisherwoman, "Is it a male or a female? I want only a female fish." On hearing this the big fish laughed. The fisher woman said to the queen, "This is a male."

The queen's establishment was all-female and in keeping with it, she wanted to have a female fish. But as the fisherwoman's fish was a male, the queen did not purchase it. But she was puzzled at the strange behaviour of the fish. She was angry too for she felt that the fish had ridiculed her.

At night when she was with her lord, the queen was rather glum and disturbed. The king said to her, "What is the matter with you? You are not your usual self today. You look rather sad and dejected."

"Yes my lord, I have had a strange experience. I called in a fisherwoman and fancied a big fish among the fishes that she was carrying for sale. When I asked her if it was male or female, she replied that it was male. On this

the big fish laughed at me and I felt insulted," replied the queen. The king exclaimed, "A fish laughing! Impossible! Are you not day dreaming?"

The queen said, "No! My lord! I am not a fool or crazy. I myself saw the strange creature laughing. It laughed loudly when I said that I wanted only a female fish."

The king's curiosity was aroused by what he was told and he was determined to find out what it all connoted. Next morning he sent for his *wazir* (chief minister). In those days these high dignitaries were thought to be the embodiment of all wisdom. The king narrated to him what the queen had seen with her own eyes and heard with her own ears. He wanted him to fathom this mystery and report back with a satisfactory explanation within six months, failing which he would lose his head.

The *wazir* set about the job in right earnest. He consulted all the wise and learned men in the land, the astrologers and soothsayers, and those well versed in magic and the occult, but to no avail. None was able to resolve the mystery of the laughing fish. Five months thus passed in this quest

and only thirty days more were left for the *wazir* to find an answer, failing which he would lose his head. The poor old man was therefore very sad and dejected. His grief and despair was too much for his family members and his son decided to lend a helping hand to his esteemed father.

The *wazir's* son was a youth of parts. He was young and intelligent, handsome and wise. He also went hither and thither, posed the problem of the laughing fish to whosoever he met, but to no avail. Nobody was able to explain the strange behaviour of the watery creature. One day he fell in with an aged farmer who was on his way to his village. He decided to join him. After going some distance the *wazir's* son said to the farmer, "Don't you think it would be more pleasant if you and I sometimes gave each other a lift?"

The old man did not like the youngman's suggestion, and did not care to give any reply. They came to a field of corn ready to be harvested. "Is this eaten or not?" asked the youngman. Not understanding his meaning the old man retorted, "I don't know".

Soon after they reached a large town on the outskirts of a forest.

As they had covered a fairly long distance, the fellow travellers were tired. The *wazir's* son gave his knife to the farmer and asked him to get two horses with it. The old man felt the youngster to be crazy and angrily pushed back the knife.

Presently they came to the city on the other side of which lay the farmer's hut. The city was busy and its shops and lanes crowded. They passed through the main bazar but nobody wished or saluted them. No one invited them into his house to rest awhile, nor did anyone offer them anything to eat or drink. "What a large cemetery" exclaimed the *wazir's* son. The old man thought the remark to be in keeping with the crazy nature of the youngster and said nothing. Soon they came to the city graveyard where a number of people were offering prayers beside a grave and distributing bread and cakes to passers-by in the name of their beloved dead. They invited the two travellers also and treated them to tea and bread. The youngman who was feeling famished was happy to get something to eat. He exclaimed, "What a splendid city this is!"

The old farmer had no doubt left in his mind that his youthful companion was really demented in

his brain. "Who but a mad cap would call a crowded city 'a cemetery' and a cemetery 'a splendid city?', he said to himself. "I wonder what he will do next. Perhaps he will call 'water' 'land' and 'land' 'water' or 'night' 'day' and 'day' 'night,' he went on in his own mind.

The farmer's hut lay across a shallow stream and to get to it one had to wade through the water. The farmer took off his shoes and his *pyjama* and crossed. But the youngman walked across with both on.

The old farmer said to himself, "Well, I never did see such a perfect fool, both in word and deed, all my life." But as he had kept him company on the way back home and amused him with his 'foolish' remarks he had come to like him somewhat. When he was near his hut he extended an invitation to him to come in and stay in his house till he was in the city. In the heart of his hearts he also felt the crazy youngster would provide some amusement to his wife and their charming young daughter.

The young man thanked him for the invitation but before accepting it he wanted to ascertain if the beam of his house was strong

enough. The farmer was puzzled and went into his hut to tell his wife and daughter what a strange creature he had come across on the way back home and what an 'idiotic' question he had asked in response to his invitation. The farmer's wife also laughed when she heard what her husband's fellow-traveller had said. But not so their young daughter. She thought over it for a while and said to her father, "This man, whoever he is, is no fool, as you deem him to be. He is a wise man and wants to know if you can afford to entertain him."

"Oh! I see! I see!" replied the farmer and added, "You can perhaps explain some of his other remarks also which have been a puzzle to me." He then told her how soon after they came together, he had suggested that he should carry the youngster and vice versa, as he thought that would be a more pleasant mode of covering the distance.

The farmer's daughter who was very sharp-witted and wise, said, "That is easily explained. Your traveller companion wanted both of you to tell stories by turns to beguile the time."

The farmer began to feel that he had misjudged his companion.

"And what did he mean when he asked if the corn-field we were passing through was eaten or not?" he asked his daughter. "Father, he simply wanted to know if the owner was in debt or not; for if he was, the rich crop was as good as eaten up for him, as it would go to his creditors," the young girl replied.

The impression that he had grossly misjudged the youngster was getting stronger and stronger with the farmer. But there were two or three other remarks that still remained to be explained. He referred these also to his sharp-witted daughter. She explained that the youngman's giving him his knife to get two horses from the forest, meant that he wanted him to get two sticks from the forest. "He gave you his knife to cut these from the trees in the forest. And are not two stout sticks as good as horses to help two travellers on a long tedious journey?" she asked.

"Yes, dear! But what is one to make of a person who describes a city pulsating with life as a 'cemetery' and a cemetery as 'a splendid city', the father went on. "Well", said the girl, "It only meant that the city whose inhabitants are indifferent and inhospitable is as

good as dead, while a cemetery where wayfarers are welcomed and served bread and cakes is as good as a flourishing city."

'True! True!' said the farmer and added, "But what have you to say in defence of a person who crosses the yonder stream with his shoes on?"

The girl replied, "That only shows how wise and careful he is. I have often wondered how foolish our own people are to cross bare-foot that stream with a bed of boulders. Some of the stones in it are sharp-edged and you know how many of them come out of it with bleeding soles." She added, "Your young friend is indeed a very wise man. I would very much like to see him. Kindly go and tell him that our beam is strong enough. Here is a present for him. This will show to him that we can afford to have him as our guest for some days."

The old farmer went out and invited the *wazir's* son inside, offering him the present sent by his daughter and adding, "Our beam is strong enough." The latter asked as to why he had taken so long inside his house.

The old farmer was a simple, unsophisticated and honest man.

He plainly told his companion how his daughter had explained the meaning of what he had said earlier. The young man was happy to

know this. Thinking that the farmer's wise daughter might have the reply to his own question—why the fish laughed—also, he gladly



... the male fish laughed at the queen's ignorance ...

walked into the old man's house and was becomingly welcomed by his wife and daughter.

The young man about whose origin they were completely unaware, was treated as a prince. In response to their affectionate queries, he told them about the laughing fish and his dear father's threatened execution if he did not resolve the mystery during the next few days. Whereupon the farmer's daughter said that the fish laughed because there was a man in the queen's household. When she insisted on taking a female fish only, the male fish laughed at the queen's ignorance of what was the true position in her own house.

The *wazir's* son jumped up in joy. He exclaimed, "Thank God, I have found the real answer to the king's dilemma. There is yet time to save my esteemed father from an ignominious and unjust death. Let me rush back to him."

He hastened back to his home and told his father, who was near

dead with the expectation of death, how he had found the answer to the mystery of the laughing fish. The two then went to the palace and the old man told the king that the fish laughed because there was a male in the queen's establishment. But the king would not agree.

On the insistence of the *wazir's* son all the queen's servants were asked to jump over a pit which was dug for the purpose. All of them tried but only one succeeded. He was found to be a man.

The royal couple was very happy to learn the truth and felt grateful to the *wazir*, and his son, especially the latter, for this timely discovery. And when the king came to know about the farmer's intelligent daughter, he had her brought to the palace, where she was given many costly presents. Soon thereafter, she was married to the *wazir's* son. The king himself presided over the ceremony and appointed the bridegroom to one of the highest offices in the administration while a similar job was found for his young wife in the queen's establishment.

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Presently they came to the city on the other side of which lay the farmer's hut. The city was busy and its shops and lanes crowded. They passed through the main bazar but nobody wished or saluted them. No one invited them into his house to rest awhile, nor did anyone offer them anything to eat or drink. "What a large cemetery" exclaimed the *wazir's* son. The old man thought the remark to be in keeping with the crazy nature of the youngster and said nothing. Soon they came to the city graveyard where a number of people were offering prayers beside a grave and distributing bread and cakes to passers-by in the name of their beloved dead. They invited the two travellers also and treated them to tea and bread. The youngman who was feeling famished was happy to get something to eat. He exclaimed, "What a splendid city this is!"

The old farmer had no doubt left in his mind that his youthful companion was really demented in

his brain. "Who but a mad cap would call a crowded city 'a cemetery' and a cemetery 'a splendid city?', he said to himself. "I wonder what he will do next. Perhaps he will call 'water' 'land' and 'land' 'water' or 'night' 'day' and 'day' 'night,' he went on in his own mind.

The farmer's hut lay across a shallow stream and to get to it one had to wade through the water. The farmer took off his shoes and his *pyjama* and crossed. But the youngman walked across with both on.

The old farmer said to himself, "Well, I never did see such a perfect fool, both in word and deed, all my life." But as he had kept him company on the way back home and amused him with his 'foolish' remarks he had come to like him somewhat. When he was near his hut he extended an invitation to him to come in and stay in his house till he was in the city. In the heart of his hearts he also felt the crazy youngster would provide some amusement to his wife and their charming young daughter.

The young man thanked him for the invitation but before accepting it he wanted to ascertain if the beam of his house was strong

enough. The farmer was puzzled and went into his hut to tell his wife and daughter what a strange creature he had come across on the way back home and what an 'idiotic' question he had asked in response to his invitation. The farmer's wife also laughed when she heard what her husband's fellow-traveller had said. But not so their young daughter. She thought over it for a while and said to her father, "This man, whoever he is, is no fool, as you deem him to be. He is a wise man and wants to know if you can afford to entertain him."

"Oh! I see! I see!" replied the farmer and added, "You can perhaps explain some of his other remarks also which have been a puzzle to me." He then told her how soon-after they came together, he had suggested that he should carry the youngster and vice versa, as he thought that would be a more pleasant mode of covering the distance.

The farmer's daughter who was very sharp-witted and wise, said, "That is easily explained. Your traveller companion wanted both of you to tell stories by turns to beguile the time."

The farmer began to feel that he had misjudged his companion.

"And what did he mean when he asked if the corn-field we were passing through was eaten or not?" he asked his daughter. "Father, he simply wanted to know if the owner was in debt or not; for if he was, the rich crop was as good as eaten up for him, as it would go to his creditors," the young girl replied.

The impression that he had grossly misjudged the youngster was getting stronger and stronger with the farmer. But there were two or three other remarks that still remained to be explained. He referred these also to his sharp-witted daughter. She explained that the youngman's giving him his knife to get two horses from the forest, meant that he wanted him to get two sticks from the forest. "He gave you his knife to cut these from the trees in the forest. And are not two stout sticks as good as horses to help two travellers on a long tedious journey?" she asked.

"Yes, dear! But what is one to make of a person who describes a city pulsating with life as a 'cemetery' and a cemetery as 'a splendid city', the father went on. "Well", said the girl, "It only meant that the city whose inhabitants are indifferent and inhospitable is as

good as dead, while a cemetery where wayfarers are welcomed and served bread and cakes is as good as a flourishing city."

'True! True!' said the farmer and added, "But what have you to say in defence of a person who crosses the yonder stream with his shoes on?"

The girl replied, "That only shows how wise and careful he is. I have often wondered how foolish our own people are to cross bare-foot that stream with a bed of boulders. Some of the stones in it are sharp-edged and you know how many of them come out of it with bleeding soles." She added, "Your young friend is indeed a very wise man. I would very much like to see him. Kindly go and tell him that our beam is strong enough. Here is a present for him. This will show to him that we can afford to have him as our guest for some days."

The old farmer went out and invited the *wazir's* son inside, offering him the present sent by his daughter and adding, "Our beam is strong enough." The latter asked as to why he had taken so long inside his house.

The old farmer was a simple, unsophisticated and honest man.

He plainly told his companion how his daughter had explained the meaning of what he had said earlier. The young man was happy to

know this. Thinking that the farmer's wise daughter might have the reply to his own question—why the fish laughed—also, he gladly



... the male fish laughed at the queen's ignorance ...

walked into the old man's house and was becomingly welcomed by his wife and daughter.

The young man about whose origin they were completely unaware, was treated as a prince. In response to their affectionate queries, he told them about the laughing fish and his dear father's threatened execution if he did not resolve the mystery during the next few days. Whereupon the farmer's daughter said that the fish laughed because there was a man in the queen's household. When she insisted on taking a female fish only, the male fish laughed at the queen's ignorance of what was the true position in her own house.

The *wazir's* son jumped up in joy. He exclaimed, "Thank God, I have found the real answer to the king's dilemma. There is yet time to save my esteemed father from an ignominious and unjust death. Let me rush back to him."

He hastened back to his home and told his father, who was near

dead with the expectation of death, how he had found the answer to the mystery of the laughing fish. The two then went to the palace and the old man told the king that the fish laughed because there was a male in the queen's establishment. But the king would not agree.

On the insistence of the *wazir's* son all the queen's servants were asked to jump over a pit which was dug for the purpose. All of them tried but only one succeeded. He was found to be a man.

The royal couple was very happy to learn the truth and felt grateful to the *wazir*, and his son, especially the latter, for this timely discovery. And when the king came to know about the farmer's intelligent daughter, he had her brought to the palace, where she was given many costly presents. Soon thereafter, she was married to the *wazir's* son. The king himself presided over the ceremony and appointed the bridegroom to one of the highest offices in the administration while a similar job was found for his young wife in the queen's establishment.

BENEVOLENT KING AND THE MONSTER

Once there lived a kind-hearted king. He was wise and benevolent and always thought of measures to make his subjects happy and prosperous. But despite all his good measures for the good of his people, he found their number steadily dwindling. This was a matter of grave concern for the benevolent ruler and he set about finding out the reason for this disquieting development. He consulted his

nobles and courtiers but they could suggest no satisfactory explanation. He therefore decided to find out for himself. And to be able to get at the unvarnished truth, he decided to go out incognito.

The king donned the robes of a *faqir* or mendicant and with a staff in one hand and a bowl in another he went out of the palace when nobody was about. He carefully



A blood hound chased the King

gave the palace-guards a slip and began visiting different towns and villages. During the course of his wanderings he came to learn that the depletion of his population was due to the depredations of a monster or *jinn*.

One day when the king was in an out-of-the-way place at the far end of an extensive plain he found a man kneeling on the ground. On nearing the spot, he found that the man was saying his prayers but he was doing so in a rather unusual manner. He kept his eyes shut and his ears closed with his fingers. The man was beating the ground with his head again and again. He was none else than the monster.

On seeing this strange spectacle the king approached him and said: "O man! Why are you offering your prayers with your eyes and ears shut? And why are you beating the ground again and again with your head?"

The human-shaped monster adopted a very pious pose, and said, "I keep my ears and eyes closed when praying so that I hear and see no evil while praying. And I beat the ground with my forehead so that insects, if any, should be scared away and I be

saved from killing any of them."

The *faqir* (king) took him to be a very pious man and asked him where he could find accommodation for the night in that God-forsaken place. "There," said the monster, "is my humble cottage and you are welcome to pass the night in it. You can share the humble meal that my wife will prepare. You seem to be a good man."

The king gladly accepted the monster's invitation and the two repaired to the seemingly holy man's house. When they got there the monster said to the woman in it, "Here is a God-fearing man come to spend the night in our humble cottage. He is tired from the day's journey. Wash his feet in warm water and in the mean time I will get some thing for our evening meal."

The king's good looks and noble demeanour struck a sympathetic chord in the woman's heart. Knowing the evil nature of the monster she was unhappy that the stranger should have fallen into his hands. She therefore told him that her so-called husband was not her spouse but a *kimyagar* (alchemist) who waylaid unwary travellers and killed them afterwards. She told him to make good his escape

before the monster returned; else he would slay him as he had slain dozens others like him.

The king thanked the lady and started to go. But she asked him to tarry a while. She gave him three big cakes and told him that he would need them on the way. The king felt highly grateful for the lady's solicitude and was about to thank her when she said, "When you are gone and the monster is back home, he will send three blood hounds after you one after the other. But you throw each one of them one of these cakes and they will not pursue you but will return to the monster. And by the time the third one returns you would have reached your capital where this monster dare not go."

The king thanked the lady and left. Soon after he left he found a ferocious blood hound running after him but he threw him a cake the

monster's woman had given him. The ferocious beast turned back. After some time the king found another bull dog fast making for him. He threw him also a cake and he at once turned back. Then came the third one and he was also sent away like his two predecessors.

By the time the third dog was sent away the king was within his own territory. He changed over into royal robes once again and proceeded to the capital where the first thing he did was to order the arrest of the monster together with the woman he held in captivity. The two were soon brought. The monster who admitted having killed a large number of the king's subjects was ordered to be publicly hanged and the lady, who had saved the king from being a victim to the monster's machinations was appointed to be in charge of the royal *zennana*.

SHABRANG

In the beautiful land of Kashmir, blessed with a wonderful range and variety of wildlife, once there was a ruler who was a keen marksman and very fond of hunting. He would often go into the nearby jungles and always return with a good bag. Once, however, when he went he came across a wonderful animal the like of which he had never seen. He was fasci-

nated and resolved to get it. He gave it a chase for a long distance but it proved to be as elusive as it was beautiful. When night came he found himself in a well laid-out forest garden in which a girl was taking an evening stroll all by herself. The girl was extremely pretty. The Kashmir ruler was so fascinated with her beauty that when he came near her, he



The King, when he found the police chief, could not help laughing

exclaimed, "Ah ! Ha ! what a marvel of nature ! How I would like to have you as a wife and put you aside in this very jungle !"

The girl did not quite relish the idea of being put aside in a jungle after her marriage and retorted, "Of course, I'd marry someone like you and get a child; the boy would marry your daughter in due course."

On return to his capital the king of Kashmir made enquiries and came to know that the beautiful girl he had chanced upon in the forest garden was no ordinary girl but a princess of a neighbouring kingdom, who was fond of forest flowers and birds. He resolved to marry her and sent wise and experienced emissaries to her father, asking for her hand in marriage. The girl's father was happy at the prospect of his daughter marrying the powerful ruler of Kashmir who held sway over so many princes. An auspicious day was fixed and the marriage solemnized with pomp and ceremony as behoved a royal wedding.

Once the princess arrived at her new home the Kashmir king seemed to forget all about her. He never visited her bed-chamber nor did he make any enquiry about

her or her welfare. After some time she was sent for by her parents, as was the custom. She went but did not return to her husband's home. She did not reveal to anyone but her mother the reason why she did not like to go back there.

But no newly-wed girl would like to be denied the pleasure of sharing her husband's company for long. The princess therefore got fed up with her life at the house of her parents and decided to travel. Her mother who loved her dearly and knew how unhappy she was at the inexplicable indifference of her husband towards her, was not averse to her proposal. But her father was very angry when his wife mooted to him a suggestion to this effect. Ultimately, however, she succeeded in getting his approval and the princess started on a lengthy trip to various territories in the neighbourhood. Her father, of course, provided her a considerable sum of money and some trusted attendants to escort and look after her during her travels.

After she had visited a number of neighbouring states she found herself on the borders of Kashmir. This was the realm of her lord and she naturally wished to see it—its capital and its people, its court

and courtiers, its palaces and its bazars. She therefore had a letter sent to the ruler (her husband) stating that she was the daughter of a friendly ruler who had come to see his country.

On receipt of this letter, the king of Kashmir went and personally conducted her into his capital. She was lodged in one of the palaces. As the king had but faint recollection of her—having seen her but once or twice only earlier—he did not recognise that she was his lawfully wedded wife. He often visited the palace on the pretext of finding out if she was quite comfortable and well but in reality to be with her for some moments. The king became very attached to her and remained with her for long hours. The princess who, of course, knew that he was her rightful lord, was only happy to welcome it. At the end of a number of weeks she, however, decided to return to her father's capital. She took leave of the king of Kashmir and returned to her parents.

Everybody was happy to have her back at her father's place. The happiest, of course, was her mother when she came to know from her how she had spent many days in the company of her husband.

Some months later the princess gave birth to a child. Her father was furious but when he learnt from the queen that the father of the boy was none other than the king of Kashmir he was pleased beyond words and ordered festivities as are usually attendant on the birth of princes. The boy was dark in colour and so was named "Shabrang," or "the colour of the night".

The boy grew up into a very intelligent and intrepid youth. He was brought up with all care and trained in all the princely arts and skills. But the mother wanted him to be trained as a thief also. This was not agreed to by her parents at first, but when she insisted, they had to yield. Accordingly a veteran thief of the realm was sent for and the boy handed over to him.

The intelligent boy did not take long to master this trade and soon his mentor presented him to his mother as fully trained in all the tricks and skills of the profession. But she set him two tests before she was satisfied. She asked him to get an egg from a hawk's nest high up in a nearby tree without disturbing the mother bird sitting in it. This Shabrang accomplished easily, though it is

well-known how risky it is to put your hand into a hawk's nest when the bird is in it. The second test was even more stiff. She asked him to get the *pyjama* of a labourer who happened to pass by.

Shabrang by passed the labourer without being noticed and when he had outdistanced him by a few paces, he stood looking up at a tree. When the labourer came near, he wondered as to why the youngman was looking up the



Do kindly let me see it today

tree intently. He asked him the reason. Shabrang put up a most pitiful expression and said that a pearl necklace of his had been left on it by a kite and he would be grateful if he would get it from the treetop. He promised him a handsome *bakshish* for it.

Shabrang had expected the labourer to take off his trousers before he went up the tree overgrown with small branches. But he did not do so. Shabrang was in a fix ; but only for a while. He hit upon a plan. He immediately went to an ant-hole by the roadside, sucked up its contents into a hollow flute-like cane and climbed up the tree. As the tree was rich in foliage, the labourer did not notice him. He was soon near the labourer's feet. He blew the contents of the cane into the poor labourer's *pyjama*. The ants were soon all over his legs and made him most uncomfortable. He, therefore, took off his *pyjama* and threw it down. Shabrang at once caught hold of the *pyjama*, quickly got down and rushed to his mother. She was highly pleased and sent her son's teacher-thief away with a good reward.

As time went on Shabrang often wondered who and where

his father was. One day, when a youth of his age with whom he was playing, twitted him on this score and said that he was an illegitimate child, he was touched to the quick. He went to his mother and said, "Mother, who is my father ? My friend has alleged that I am an illegitimate child. Is this so ?"

"No ! No ! My son. You are the son of the king of Kashmir. I was duly married to him. But he has cruelly deserted me without cause," his mother replied.

"Dear mother, why didn't you tell me this before ? Why hasn't my grand father avenged this grave injustice at the point of the sword ?" asked Shabrang.

The mother said, "My darling, you should not be impatient. Your father is perhaps not to be blamed entirely. It was my fate, my cruel fate that has led to all this." Then after a pause she added "I have trained you in all the princely arts, and even in thievery, so that you are, in due course, able to ingratiate yourself in your father's favour to such an extent that he offers you his daughter in marriage. That will be a much better way of avenging my disgrace, and in consonance with what I had told him when he met me for the first time."

"Good," said Shabrang, "I will do as you say." Next morning Shabrang left for Kashmir. When he arrived at the capital, he made friends with the palace guards and through their good offices he was able to get appointed as one of the attendants in the palace. This brought him to the notice of the king who was very pleased with his appearance and etiquette and promoted him to a high office in the royal household. But this could hardly ensure that the Kashmir princess's hand would be offered to him in marriage. He, therefore, decided to lay his skill in thievery under contribution. So every other night he went on stealing expeditions and hid whatever he got in a pit he dug under a stately chinar tree.

Shabrang who had received his training under one of the most dreaded burglars of his time, went about his task so efficiently that no clue was available to the real thief, especially as he was scrupulous in attending to his work in the palace punctually and regularly.

Meanwhile, with so many daily losing their money and valuables, the people got very panicky and made several representations to the king to bring the offenders to book. The king himself was

worried when he came to know that some people were thinking of fleeing the capital.

The king called the *Kotwal* and severely reprimanded him for the deterioration in the situation. He ordered him to urgently trace the offender or offenders.

The *Kotwal* or police chief made special efforts to nab the culprits. Policemen were stationed in every street and had orders to catch hold of whoever roused their suspicion. The *Kotwal* himself spent the whole night going here and there but no trace of the thief or thieves was to be found. Meanwhile Shabrang continued his depredations and deposited the booty in the pit under the chinar.

The poor victims went to the palace and reported their misfortune to the king. He sent for the *Kotwal* and again upbraided him severely. The latter explained to the king in detail the arrangements he had made to get hold of the culprits and how he had personally been patrolling the city at night.

The king too was baffled and gave the police chief a week's time more to bring the offenders to book, failing which he would lose his job.

During the week the police chief tried all methods and stratagems that he knew of. His trusted men disguised in different kinds of dresses, went here and there. He offered monetary inducements for any clue leading to the detection of the thief or thieves. He assured protection to those who came forward to give information against them. But the thief was not discovered although thefts continued to take place all the time and even oftener than before. In fact the extra measures adopted by the police chief for his capture put Shabrang on his mettle and impelled him to yet more daring exploits in his chosen field of thievery.

The whole city was disturbed. There was a growing sense of gnawing insecurity all over. Nobody felt his property safe even though they kept watch by day and vigil by night, in addition to what the authorities were doing.

The police chief was very much perturbed when there was no clue to the thief or the thieves for six days. On the seventh day when he went to report to the king he said, "My lord, I have done all that I could do; nobody could have done more, yet the rascals are still at large."

"Yes, I know," said the king. "Go, take a few army units also and order them about as you will. Make a final determined bid to apprehend the rascals who have made life impossible in our capital."

So on the seventh night army units joined the police to mount guard all over the city. The police chief who personally supervised the arrangements was on his feet till midnight when in a rather unfrequented garden by the riverside, he saw a strange figure moving stealthily. He felt this was the thief and rushed to capture him. He caught hold of the strange figure and said, "Who are you and what are you here for?" "I am a poor gardener's wife and have come here to draw water," the strange figure replied.

"What a time to draw water! Why did you not do so during day time?" shouted the *Kotwal*.

"I was too busy", the strange figure replied.

The police chief was apparently satisfied with the woman's explanation and said to her, "Have you seen or heard anything of the thief who has made life impossible for the people in the capital?"

"Yes, Yes. He has just been here and took away all the *hak** that I had collected for sale tomorrow." Kotwal : "Where did he go ?" Gardener's wife : "He went in that direction. But he is likely to come again, for he has asked me to gather more *hak* for him."

The police chief was very happy. Was it that luck had at last started smiling on him ? He would definitely nab the rascal and be the recipient of honours and reward at the hands of the king.

He went in the direction indicated by the gardener's wife but no trace of the thief was to be found anywhere. He returned to the woman and asked,

"Hasn't the rascal turned up ?" Gardener's wife : "No. Not so far. But wait ; he is bound to come again. You will surely be able to catch him".

The *Kotwal* was happy at the prospect. "But how can I catch him, clad as I am in my uniform ?" he said. "The thief will run away as soon as he catches sight of me," he added.

Gardener's wife : "Change your dress".

Kotwal : "But the rascal may turn up while I am gone to do so".

Gardener's wife : "That is true. If you have no objection, you could put on my *pheran* and pretend to be drawing water. He is bound to come again to take the rest of my *hak*. You can then go up to him and seize him."

The *Kotwal* was not averse to the suggestion. He put on the dirty *pheran* of the gardener's wife. But he had never before drawn water. So he asked the woman to show him how this was done.

The gardener's wife had cleverly put away the big stone that was fastened to one end of the *tol** pole to draw water. The *tol* therefore did not work when she pulled at its rope. She told the *Kotwal* that the *tol* would work only if a weight was fastened to its loose, lower end. But there was no stone near about which could be utilised for the purpose. The *Kotwal* was anxious to get hold of the thief at any cost. There was no time to be lost. So he offered himself for the purpose, if that would do. This

* Green leafy vegetable of which Kashmiries are very fond.

* An ingenious wooden contraption to draw water from a well or stream.

was what the gardener's wife, who was none other than Shabrang, had been looking forward to. He, therefore, fastened him to the loose end of the *tol* pole and pulled at the rope till the *Kotwal* was nearly twenty feet high up in the air. He tied the rope to a peg nearby and left the poor police chief in that precarious position. "Oh ! What have you done ? Bring me down," cried the police chief. The gardener's wife told him in a low voice : "Keep quiet or the thief will hear you and not come this way. You need not be afraid. The beam will not come down of itself. I am here and when the thief comes you will be able to spot him from some distance. Inform me immediately when he appears and I will bring you down at once to catch him."

Shabrang then picked up the *Kotwal's* clothes and went home to have a nap before starting on his nocturnal depredations. The poor *Kotwal* waited expectantly but no one appeared. He felt most uncomfortable and would like to be brought down. But who was there to oblige him. He shouted for the gardener's wife but where was she ? When there was no response he understood that he had been cruelly duped and the gardener's wife was no

other than the thief himself. The night was cold and the wind was blowing. He cried himself hoarse for help. But who would oblige him in that God forsaken place.

Next morning a number of people again went to the palace and complained that their property had been stolen at night. The king sent for the police chief but he was not at home; he had not been there since the previous evening. The king sent messengers in all directions. One of them came to the garden and found the mighty *Kotwal*, dressed in a woman's garment, sitting across the raised end of the *tol* beam and almost frozen with cold. He felt pity for the police boss, whose very name used to frighten people, but he could not help chuckling to himself at the ridiculous scene. At first he thought of bringing him down from his agonising position but on second thoughts he decided not to do so. The *Kotwal* was in such an awkward position that nobody would possibly believe it. So he hurried to the palace and told the king what he had seen. The king came personally and when he found the police chief in his ridiculous position, he could not help laughing. Immediately

he had him brought down. The *Kotwal* was so ashamed of himself that he wanted to commit suicide. But the king consoled him and sent him home with some trusted attendants.

On return to the palace the king called his *Wazir* to take counsel with him about what should be done to tackle the desperate situation created by the thief's depredations. He told him that unless something effective was done soon to catch the thief or thieves, the people would be constrained to quit the capital. "How sad it is that we are not able to offer them protection!" he told his *Wazir*.

Seeing his liege-lord in a tight corner, the *Wazir* volunteered to take charge of the task of bringing the culprit to book.

Shabrang who also came to know about it thought out his own strategy for the night. He went out dressed as an old woman when in the evening the senior *Wazir* rode out on his well-bred horse. Shabrang took up his position in a mud hut in an out-of-the-way suburb and began grinding maize by the dim light of an oil lamp which he lit up in the room. As he expected, the *Wazir* came up around mid-

night, drew up his horse, and asked who was there.

"An old, unfortunate woman," was the reply. "I am grinding maize", she added in a piteous voice.

"But why are you doing so at this late hour in the night?" the *Wazir* asked.

"A rascal of a man has just been here. He took away all the maize I had ground since evening. He beat me and asked me to grind the rest of it also for him. He will come back and has threatened to kill me if I did not do his bidding. He will presently be here," said the old hag.

The *Wazir* was happy to know that the thief would be there soon. He told the old lady that he was there to catch the thief and once he was caught he would teach him a lesson that he would remember for life. But the woman said to him, "Dressed as you are and riding a grand horse, will you ever be able to catch the thief?"

The *Wazir* saw the point and decided to change his apparel. But as the thief was expected soon, it would not be wise to go

home for the purpose. The situation was grave and called for immediate and extraordinary measures. Success in the operation he had undertaken on his own, was too valuable to be thrown away on petty considerations. Success would add further laurels to his reputation. He therefore decided to exchange clothes with the old woman at the grinding stone and grind maize till the thief came. He put his horse away behind the hut, donned the grimy clothes of the old woman and sat near the door of the hut and began grinding maize in the dim light of the candle inside.

Shabrang put on the clothes of the grand *Wazir* and rode off on his horse. After a spell of sound sleep Shabrang was back at his nocturnal job. Next morning when he was back at his place in the palace, he saw a number of people come to complain of the theft of their jewellery, clothes and cash during the night. The king was greatly distressed and asked for the senior *Wazir* to be called. A messenger was sent to his house but he reported that the high dignitary was not there though his horse had arrived without its rider early in the morning. Some people felt that the *Wazir*

might have been killed by the thieves. Others thought that he might have committed suicide. But the king did not give credence to such stories. He knew how wise and circumspect he normally was. He therefore went out personally to trace him out. He was accompanied by a posse of police and some trusted attendants including Shabrang.

In an hour or so they came to the miserable mud hut where the missing *Wazir* sat by the side of a huge grinding stone with a lot of maize flour around it. They would not at first recognise him, dressed as he was in the dirty rags of a poor old woman. But as soon as the king stepped near the hut, the grand *Wazir* ran out and fell at his feet, weeping bitterly. Like the *Kotwal* before him, he also wanted to put an end to his life. But the king consoled him and sent him home.

Not discouraged by the plight of his boss, the police chief, and the senior *Wazir*, an ambitious young police *Thanedar* (inspector) thought that he would succeed where others had failed. He went to the palace next day and boldly asserted that given charge he would catch the thief. The king welcomed his offer. He was

placed in command of the police force and an army contingent was placed at his disposal if he needed it.

Shabrang came to know about the vain young *Thanedar's* bid to catch him. He, therefore, planned his strategy. He was a quick-witted person who tailored his strategy to the occasion. He went out disguised as the *Wazir's* daughter and took his position in his garden. After some time when the young hopeful put in his appearance he was seated in the *Wazir's* garden. The *Thanedar* approached him and said in an authoritative tone, "who are you?"

"The *Wazir's* daughter," replied Shabrang in his disguise, and asked, "What are you looking for?"

"The thief", said the *Thanedar*. He added, "He disgraced your venerable father and before that my own chief. But today he cannot escape. I will catch him and put him behind bars."

"What will you do with him if you are able to catch him?" asked the *Wazir's* daughter.

"I will put the blackguard in chains and lodge him in the innermost cell where even the sun and

moon do not penetrate. But I will visit him daily and give him such a drubbing that he will vow not to steal again," said the *Thanedar*.

The *Wazir's* daughter said, "What is a prison like? I've never seen one. Would you mind taking me there?"

Thanedar : "Not today. I am very busy now; I will do so some other time when I have time".

Wazir's daughter : "Do kindly let me see it today. I have often requested my father to enable me to see it, but he would not agree. Today is a golden opportunity to do so. Oh, do take me there. Father is in and not likely to move out today. He was out all night yesterday and is ill."

Thanedar : "But he will get angry with me when he comes to know about it."

Wazir's daughter : "He will never know. I promise that; I will have you rewarded handsomely. Make haste."

The *Thanedar* bowed to her wishes and took her to the prison. There was just one policeman on duty on the outer gate, others having gone with the rest of the police force to arrest the thief. The

Wazir's daughter made detailed enquiries about how the prisoners were chained, and robed and how they looked inside their cells. The obliging *Thanedar* offered to put on the prisoner's clothes and chains. He did so. The *Wazir's* daughter requested him to move into the solitary prison cell also to enable her to see how a prisoner looked in it. He got the key, opened the lock and flung open the door. He strutted in. As soon as he was inside, the *Wazir's* daughter (*Shabrang*) bolted it from outside, and walked away with the keys. The *Thanedar* understood what had happened, but too late. He cried and cried, but who was going to listen? The *chowkidar* at the outer gate could not budge from his post of duty. *Shabrang* threw off the disguise and donned the *Thanedar's* uniform. He then made straight for the *Thanedar's* house and hurriedly asked his wife, in the prevailing darkness, to give him all the costly jewellery and cash in the house. He told her that as he had failed in his mission to arrest the thief, he would be publicly disgraced by the king tomorrow. He had therefore decided to quit the city. He would send word to her, how, when and where to join him, he told her.

The poor woman hurriedly brought the jewellery and all the cash there was in the house and handed it over to *Shabrang* who, she thought, was her husband. *Shabrang* went away with the booty. Before going to sleep he, however, relieved some people of their belongings and cash.

Next morning when his victims approached the king, with their tales of woe, the latter had the boastful *Thanedar* sent for. But he was not found at his home. The king, therefore, had a thorough search made for him. Great was the king's surprise when he was informed that the over-enthusiastic *Thanedar's* folly had landed him in a solitary prison cell and the thief had visited his house and obtained from his wife her costly jewellery and all their cash.

The king was deeply concerned over the growing spate of thefts and robberies, which were compelling the well-to-do citizens to flee the city. He, therefore, called an assembly of all the respectable men to confer with them about what should be done. Addressing the assembled worthies, he said, "It is useless to try to catch the thief. He is as elusive as the wind. The whole of the police force, and

some units of the armed forces, have been trying their best to catch him all these days. But in vain. On the contrary, you have seen how the police chief and the grand *Wazir* themselves have been disgraced and made laughing stocks of. He is no ordinary thief and the situation is desperate. As such it calls for extraordinary measures to handle it. We have, therefore, decided to give our daughter in marriage and half of our kingdom to the thief if he comes forward to own his faith and sincerely promises to give up his evil ways."

The assemblage of respectable citizens, courtiers and the palace staff were astounded to hear His Majesty's declaration. They were whispering to one another when Shabrang sprang forward and boldly said, "I am the thief I"

All eyes were turned towards Shabrang, who went on to add, "Lest there be any doubt about what I say I am prepared to restore all the property and cash that I have stolen all these days." He then took the king, his courtiers and others present to the big chinar from underneath which all the stolen property was recovered intact. Everybody went home happy

and the land returned to peace and normalcy.

True to his declaration, the king wanted to give his daughter in marriage to Shabrang. But before it could be done, Shabrang wanted his mother to be brought. She was immediately brought and when the king told her that he wanted to give his daughter to her son in marriage, she said, "It is so generous on the part of Your Majesty to say so but this marriage is not possible. A brother cannot marry his sister."

The king was puzzled. "I do not understand you. What do you mean by saying that your son and my daughter are brother and sister, he said. "Yes, my lord! They are," she said. After a brief pause she added, "You do not recognise me." Then handing over to him a ring and a handkerchief, she said to him, "These will remind you of me. Take these; they are yours. Give me back the signet ring which I gave you in exchange."

The king recognised his things and his wife told him how he had forgotten and forsaken her; how she had visited him in disguise and lived with him as his wife. Then she went on to relate how Shabrang was born and brought

up, how she had prevailed upon him to go to the Kashmir court and so manage things that the king would be constrained to offer him his daughter in marriage, as she had suggested when the king first met her in the forest garden and wanted to take her as his

wife. The king was sorry about what had happened and he and his wife were reconciled to each other and Shabrang was recognised as the heir-apparent. Henceforth all of them lived in peace and happiness.

INTELLIGENT PRINCESS

Two mighty rulers were possessed of vast territories and great wealth. One of them had a lovely daughter and the other a handsome young son. As the two grew in years, their parents thought of marrying them. They sent out messengers to find suitable matches for them.

It so happened that the two messengers met one day and told each other of the purpose of their errand. They were happy to know that their quest was similar and since one of them looked for a suitable prince and the other for an accomplished and beautiful princess, they felt that it was



The jinn was exceedingly happy to know that his daughter had married a prince

God's wish that the two should be united in wedlock. The two messengers, therefore, returned to their cities and told their respective patrons about the prince and princess who, in their opinion, would make an ideal couple. The rulers were almost equal in power and prestige and they readily agreed. They communicated with each other and fixed a date of the marriage.

On the appointed day the bridegroom went to the house of his father-in-law in a huge procession led by a number of bands, dancers, singers and elephants bedecked with costly trappings. The groom himself rode on a caparisoned white horse and was followed by a whole host of courtiers, nobles and other dignitaries. The marriage ceremony was solemnized in a most befitting manner. There was much mirth and festivity. Everybody was happy, the happiest, of course, being the bride and her groom and their parents.

As the capitals of the two kingdoms were separated by a considerable distance, the couple, while returning, halted for rest in a garden en route. The garden belonged to a *jinn* or demon

who had earmarked it for some fairies whom he held in captivity. The fairies fell in love with the handsome prince whom they found asleep in their garden when they returned in the evening. They decided to make him their own by charming him into death-like sleep, so that he might be given up for dead by his people. Next morning when the prince did not get up, the princess tried to rouse him again and again but in vain. She, therefore, thought that the prince was dead. She was deeply grieved. She wept bitterly. As she was mourning over her lot, and was thinking about how to dispose of his dead body an ochre-robed mendicant appeared before her and told her not to think of burying him. He said to her, "Your husband is not dead. He will revive in due course of time. Meanwhile you could return to your parents." The sage then disappeared.

The holy man's words came like a boon to the princess and she ordered that her husband's body should be kept as it was in the garden. She dismissed her retinue and asked them to return to their respective homes; she herself decided to remain in the garden near her husband's body. But when her father came to

know about what had happened, he and his wife both rushed to the garden and persuaded their daughter to return to the palace. She was most reluctant to do so but ultimately agreed on condition that the prince's body would be allowed to remain where it was for the mendicant had told her that he would revive in a few days.

The poor princess was very unhappy at her parents' palace. She was overwhelmed with grief and had little interest in life. The only thing that sustained her was the holy man's prophesy that her husband would revive soon.

She decided to return to the garden where she had very unwillingly left her husband, but she wanted to do so unaccompanied by any one. This, however, was not agreed to by her father at first but later he gave his consent for his queen told him that their beloved daughter would end her life if she was not allowed to go to the garden all by herself.

To her great dismay the grief-stricken princess failed to locate her sleeping husband in the garden. She wandered here and there and asked everyone she came across, if he had seen her

husband. But no one had any knowledge about him. One day, however, a venerable old man told her that he had passed through a garden in which he found a handsome young man fast asleep. He added, "I was wondering why the young man had chosen such a lonely spot for rest when some fairy like women appeared, placed a wand under his head and he got up and talked with them." "What happened next?" the prince asked anxiously. The old man said. "Well, after some time the handsome young women, took the wand from under the young man's head and placed it under his feet. He immediately fell fast asleep again."

The princess understood that the sleeping young man was none other than her dear husband. She implored the old man to lead her to the garden, situated at a more distant and out-of-the-way place where the fairies had removed the prince.

The old man felt pity and led her to the garden, where she found the prince fast asleep, as she had left him. She approached him slowly, removed the magic wand from under his feet and placed it under his head. The prince at once got up and recognised

his wife who fell at his feet, clasping his legs in a tight embrace. The prince was astonished and said to his wife, "How did you get here?"

"With a venerable old man's help who had found you fast asleep," said the princess. "Pray get up and let us run away from this awful place," she added. This the prince felt was not a wise move. He said "This I cannot do. The fairies will soon find me out wherever I am and kill both of us. If you love me, place the wand under my feet once again and go away."

The princess said to him, "I will never again leave you, come what may."

The prince said to her "In that case hide yourself in the hollow of that ancient tree after placing the wand under my feet. The fairies are expected here any moment now."

The princess did as bid and the prince relapsed into the death-like sleep as soon as she laid the wand under his feet. She hid herself in the hollow of a huge tree in a corner.

When the fairies came they sensed that someone else had

been in the garden. They went in this direction and that but finding no one they went to the sleeping prince and placed the wand under his head. He at once got up. "Has someone been here in our absence?" they asked the prince. "No!" he said emphatically. But they were not satisfied. They smelt human presence in the air and decided to take the prince to another garden on the morrow. They, therefore put him to sleep again and went away. The princess came out of the tree trunk and roused the prince from his sleep by placing the wand under his head. Poor lady! She was deeply distressed when the prince told her that the fairies had decided to shift him to a more distant garden next day.

The princess was very intelligent. She plucked some flowers in the garden and gave them to the prince to put in his pockets. She asked him to drop them one by one while he was transported to other garden. Their fragrance, she said would enable her to trace the place where the fairies would keep him.

Next morning when the fairies carried their captive to the other garden, he dropped the flowers en route. The princess soon

followed him by the scent of the flowers. She came to an extensive garden in which stood a lovely mansion. She went in but found nobody inside. She sat on a low chair to rest awhile. This was the *jinn's* palace and the demon was not long in coming.

The princess got up with a start when demon entered the room. He mistook her for his daughter who had been carried by an enemy demon. He said to her, "My darling. How did you get back? How did you manage to get away from the clutches of that rascal? I will crush him to death one of these days."

The princess was very wise and sharp-witted and at once understood the situation. She said to the demon, "I came away as the demon lay asleep." "My darling? My sweet daughter I am so happy to see you back again!" exclaimed the demon. He called the fairies and said to them, "Here is my beloved daughter. Do her every bidding and make her perfectly comfortable. From now onwards you are her maid-servants. Let me hear no complaint from her."

The princess lived in the house for some time and was recognised

by everybody as the *jinn's* daughter. As the *jinn* was out all the while, she was the complete master and could do and get what she liked.

The fairies who lived in the *jinn's* custody were possessed of extraordinary powers. They could hide anybody anywhere. The princess learnt some of their secrets and acquired their powers. One day she found her beloved prince concealed in the ear ornament of one of the fairies. She pretended to like the ornament very much and asked its wearer to hand it over to her. The fairy was rather reluctant to do so but, remembering that she was her master's daughter, she dared not offend her. So she gave it to her for a night.

As soon as the fairy was gone the princess extricated the prince from the ear-ornament. The prince wept with joy when he found his wife near him again. But he was apprehensive about their safety, For if their identity was known they would be torn to bits.

But the princess was a courageous lady. She said to the prince, "Please don't be afraid. The demon and all the fairies believe that I am the *jinn's* daughter who was

forcibly carried away by another *jinn*. As he had had but little time to spend with his daughter he does not realise who I really am. I shall, therefore, take you to him when he returns and tell him that I was able to make good my escape with your assistance and captivated by your beauty had married you. I shall also tell him that you are a prince and request him to accord his blessings to our marriage. I am sure the demon who is strongly attached to his daughter will not disappoint me. Don't be apprehensive. The plan will work."

The plan did work as the princess had foreseen. The *jinn* was exceedingly happy to know that his daughter had married a prince. He held a grand feast to

which all the fairies in his captivity were also invited. They were not happy at the loss of their beloved but they dared not say any thing to their captor.

The prince and the princess remained for some days more in the *jinn's* house. Then the princess sought the permission of her 'father' to go to her husband's home. He was sorry to let her go but realising that the natural place of a woman is her husband's home, he sent her away, loaded with presents of various kinds.

The couple's return to their capital was hailed by all and sundry and there was great jubilation all over the kingdom.

PETTY THEFTS LEAD TO BIGGER ONES

"Yes, I have one wish which I would like to be fulfilled before I am hanged," said the man who had been proved guilty of many daring dacoities and ghastly murders, and was about to be put on the gallows.

It was a custom in olden days to ask a person duly sentenced to death for murder, to name

a last wish which would be granted before he was hanged. It was in accordance with this time-honoured practice that the old widow's only son was asked to express his last wish so that it could be fulfilled before he was executed.

At first the man about to be hanged showed little interest in



The whole crowd was stunned

the offer, but when it was repeated twice or thrice he said that his old mother be brought so that he could have a last meeting with her.

The officials who were to supervise the execution, as also the concourse of people that had gathered to witness the hanging of the most notorious and dangerous dacoit of the time, were all taken aback at the strange request made by the condemned prisoner. But since it was the practice to grant the last wish of a person about to be put on the gallows, the presiding officer at the execution ordered his mother to be brought at once.

The hapless mother was already in the crowd, weeping bitterly. When her name was called she willingly stepped forward to have a last meeting with her beloved child.

She was escorted to where her dacoit-son stood at the foot of the gallows. She embraced him tightly and asked him as to what it was that he wanted of her at the end of his life.

He said, "Mother, I would like to suck at your breast as I did when I was a baby."

The old, emaciated lady, whose breasts had run dry long long ago

was astonished at the strange wish of her condemned son. So were the officials and the people gathered to supervise and witness the execution. But what not a mother do for her child, especially an only beloved child, whose days, nay, even minutes, are numbered. She bared her breast and her dacoit-son avidly took it into his big mouth. Presently a most piercing shriek escaped her lips, for her unworthy son had bitten off a big lump of her withered breast with his razor-sharp teeth. The whole crowd was stunned. The bleeding mother and her son were ordered to be produced before the presiding officer. He scolded the prisoner, "What have you done, you rascal?"

The prisoner said in reply, "Sir, I have done the right thing. For it is my mother who is responsible for all my crimes."

The officer asked, "How is that? The prisoner replied, "Sir, it is she who made me a thief".

The audience listened in pin-drop silence. The prisoner went on to say : "Sir, my father, passed away when I was hardly nine months old. His death left my mother completely destitute and she was hard put to it to feed two

mouths. Some of our good natured neighbours, however, came to our aid. Their women would occasionally get us some food. They gave us clothes also. When I began to walk some of these good natured women would take me to their houses and feed me. One of them once took me with herself to the bazaar. As she was purchasing some vegetables, I picked up an egg from the vegetable vendor's shop. I had seen our neighbours' children take eggs but this was a luxury completely denied to us. I therefore carefully hid the egg and gave it to my mother when I returned home. She was happy to receive it. Thereafter whenever I went to the bazaar, I pilfered away some thing or the other from one or the other shop. But my mother never restrained me; she never told me that I was doing something wrong. As time went on I became more and more daring and went from petty thefts to bigger ones till I became

a dreaded dacoit and did not refrain from even taking innocent people's lives to gain my nefarious ends. Thus it is that I am about to face the gallows today. I feel that but for my mother's encouragement in my thievish activities, I would not meet the cruel fate that awaits me in a few minutes from now. That is why I feel that the real culprit is my mother who always encouraged me to steal. Therefore when the offer of the grant of a last dying wish was made to me twice or thrice I decided to punish her so that people may realise how the elders' connivance at and encouragement of their children's misdeeds ultimately lead to their doom and destruction". They should know that *Thoola tsur-i petha-i-chay moola tsur navan*. (Theft of eggs leads one to bigger thefts).

And with these words the condemned man proceeded to the gallows.

BRAHMAN AND THREE BLIND MEN

In good old days when things were cheap, a hundred rupees was a big sum. Accordingly when a poor brahman who was near starvation, launched upon a course of deep piety and severe penance to mitigate his penury, he sought a boon of just one hundred rupees. God granted his prayer and the brahman got the sum that he had prayed for. He was pleased beyond measure and, in gratitude, he decided to give away in charity one-tenth of what he had been blessed with.

He had not to wait for long to give effect to his good resolve. A blind beggar with outstretched hand appeared presently and the brahman put ten one-rupee coins in his hand. The beggar who was accustomed to getting a pice or a half only from his patrons, was astonished to get such a big sum from one single individual. He wondered what kind of man he

was who parted with such a fat sum of money in favour of a blind beggar. He thought that his patron must be a very rich person or he must suddenly have got a fortune. The beggar again and again sampled the coins which he had just got, and said to his benefactor, "Sir ! How come that you are so generous to a blind, unfortunate beggar ?"

"Baba," replied the brahman, "I prayed to God Almighty devoutly and meditated for forty days. He was pleased and bestowed a sum of one hundred rupees on me. Out of this I have decided to give one-tenth in charity."

The beggar said to him, "I have never handled a hundred rupees. Please let me see them."

The brahman handed over to him the handkerchief in which he

had tied the remaining ninety rupees. The beggar felt it again and again and then stowed it away in his arm-pit.

The brahman asked the beggar to return to him the handkerchief

in which his ninety rupees were tied up. But the beggar did not do so. The brahman therefore tried to snatch it away from him. The blind beggar raised a hue and cry. He shouted, "This man is trying to deprive me of my



The brahman put ten one rupee coins in his hand

hard-earned collection. He is a thief ! He is a thief ! Oh help me, help me, please!"

A number of people gathered around. One of them came forward and said to the blind beggar, "How much money do you have in that handkerchief?" "Ninety rupees," said the beggar in reply. The sum was counted and the beggar's statement found to be correct. "What has the world come to ! Here is a bearded brahman trying to deprive a poor blind beggar of his earnings, collected pice by pice over a long period of time," said the man who had come forward. Others in the crowd nodded in assent.

The clever, crafty beggar's statement was believed and he was allowed to retain the money. The poor innocent brahman protested but who was going to listen to him. He returned home dejected and crest fallen. "Why are you so downcast and dispirited?" asked his wife when the brahman returned home. He said, "God favoured me with a good sum of money, but I lost it through my own folly." He then related to his wife how his generosity had been his undoing.

The brahman's wife was a highly intelligent woman. She told

her husband that he had indeed acted most foolishly in handing over his money to the blind beggar, and added, "Some of the beggars are very wicked and vile. You should never believe them. Anyway, go back and find out where the blind man keeps the money which he has got from you so deceitfully."

The brahman went out and found the blind beggar near a place of worship which was empty at that time of the day. The beggar lifted a corner of a mat spread on the floor. From underneath it he drew out an earthenware pot in which he deposited the hundred rupees that he had snatched from the brahman. He then let drop the mat on the ground again and raising his hands in thanks-giving, said, "Thank God ! This morning I had one thousand rupees only but now I have one thousand and one hundred."

The brahman who was standing by, unseen by the blind beggar, heard all this and as soon as the beggar left, he took out the pot buried in the ground under the mat and removed the eleven hundred rupees that were lying in it.

The brahmans wife was highly pleased when her husband reported to her that in place of one hundred rupees he had now got eleven times that sum. However, she counselled him to go to the place of worship again at the same time tomorrow to find out what the beggar would do next.

The brahman did so. The blind beggar was deeply grieved when on coming to the place of worship again next day to deposit his day's earnings, he found the pot empty. He wept and wailed and cursed himself. The priest in charge of the place, who was also blind, came to sympathise with him when he heard the cries of the blind beggar. He said to the beggar, "How foolish of you to have kept all your cash buried in a pot in a public place of worship ! You should have kept it with yourself as I do."

"Where do you keep yours ?" asked the beggar.

"I keep it in my stick. It is hollow inside. It is always with me," replied the priest. He added, "Go and get a similar stick for yourself and you will never again have to worry."

The brahman who was overhearing their conversation got a

similar stick prepared. Some days later when the blind priest was at his prayers and had kept his stick by his side, he approached him stealthily and replaced his stick with the one he had got prepared and hastened back home where he took out all the savings of the unfortunate priest. The brahman and his wife were very happy while the poor priest wept bitterly.

The brahman's wife again sent her husband back to find out what the priest was doing at the loss of his hard earned savings. When he came he found the priest with another blind person who was scolding him for his foolishness in keeping his money in a stick. He said to him, "Is that the way one should keep one's money when one is blind ? I am also blind but I keep my money sewed up in my clothes which I wear next to my body. Who can take it away ?"

Both of them had, however, not seen the brahman who was quietly listening to their conversation. He went home and told his wife what he had heard. They decided to deprive this man also of his earnings. The brahman went and bought a hive full of bees. He placed it at the bottom of an earthenware jar and over it he laid a thick layer of honey. He gave

the jar to the third blind beggar. The latter was happy to get it and took honey from it again and again. But when the layer of honey was consumed and he put his hand into the jar again, it came up against the hive. The bees were provoked and came out in swarms and stung the poor blind beggar. They followed him wherever he went and ultimately he was obliged to take off his cloak and throw it away as he rushed into his house. The brahman who was seeing all this took the cloak and went to his wife where they removed all the money that the poor beggar had stowed away in it. They were very happy.

The poor beggar who was overwhelmed with grief at the loss of his savings went to the blind priest and the two together went to their friend, the blind beggar who had deposited his cash in a pot in the ground floor of a place of worship. They took counsel with one another and went and reported their misfortune to the king.

The king listened to their tales of woe most sympathetically, had them fed and clothed and sent them away with donations in cash. He was very curious to know the person who had duped the three shrewd and clever beggars. He, therefore, had it proclaimed by beat of drum that the person who had duped the three blind beggars would be pardoned and rewarded if he came forth to confess his guilt. The brahman took counsel with his intelligent wife, and decided to go to the palace to relate to his ruler how he had deprived the blind beggar and his two friends of their savings. "But did you do all this on your own or did you do so at some one else's suggestion?" asked the king.

"No, my lord I did so on the suggestion of my wife," said the brahman.

The king pardoned the brahman and sent him away with handsome presents for himself and his intelligent wife.

TREACHEROUS WAZIR

The king was a man of taste and ruled over a wide domain. He was a powerful ruler and a number of ruling princes had given their daughters to him in marriage. He had thus a large *harem*. But as the king's wives were not free to move about as they liked, he had built a wonderful garden for them to stroll in. Here the ladies of

the *harem* were free to roam about without the veil. No male was permitted inside the ladies' garden which was securely guarded by female attendants.

Once, however, a *faqir* managed to get into this garden. The attendants on guard at once reported the matter to the chief



You are a traitor and death is the proper punishment for you

queen who had her husband apprised of the intrusion. The king sent for his *wazir* and both of them went into the garden.

The king said to the intruder, "O, *faqir* how and why did you enter this garden which is out of bounds for males? Where do you come from?"

The *faqir* said, "What harm have I done you or any of the ladies? Have I cut any flower? I came here only for a stroll and will go away presently. But, remember, loyalty is rare."

The *faqir* was possessed of great powers. He decided to give a demonstration of his miraculous powers to the king. A flowering plant was growing where the king stood and at its foot lay a dead *bulbul*. The *faqir* immediately fell down dead beside the king and dead nightingale arose and flew out of the garden. The king and his *wazir* were wonder-struck at what had happened. And as they were wondering over the miracle that had taken place, the nightingale flew in, fell down dead at the king's feet and the *faqir* revived and rose again. The king and the *wazir* both were surprised beyond words and made their obeisance to the *faqir*. The

king invited him to the palace and lodged him in one of the best rooms in it. A number of attendants were put on the job of ministering to his needs. In course of time the king requested the miracle-making *faqir* to reveal his secret to him and his trusted *wazir*. The *faqir* was at first reluctant to do so. But when he remembered what respect the king had shown him he was persuaded to part with his secret.

One day the king, accompanied by his *wazir*, went into the jungle to hunt. In the forest he found a dead parrot. He had never so far tried the extraordinary powers which the *faqir* had conferred upon him and his *wazir*. He felt that the dead parrot in the forest provided a welcome opportunity for him to test whether the secret that the *faqir* had confided in him, really invested him and his *wazir* with the power to transfer themselves into dead bodies and vice-versa at will. The king therefore asked his *wazir* to put himself into the dead body of the parrot. He told him that he would like to see how this heavenly bird looked when it was alive. The *wazir* refused to do so. He said the bird had been dead for quite some time and its body was stinking.

The *wazir* was not sincere. He

did not want to transfer himself into the dead body of the parrot as he had mischief up his sleeve. The king suggested to him again and again to transfer himself into the dead bird's body but finding the *wazir* adamant in his refusal he decided to do so himself and test the validity of the mysterious power that the *faqir* had conferred upon him. He abandoned his body and entered that of the dead parrot.

The *wazir* was waiting for this opportunity. As the king's body fell dead, he gave up his own and entered it. He cut into bits his own body and riding the king's horse he went to the palace.

When he arrived at the palace he announced a handsome reward to whosoever brought him a dead parrot. He also made it known that the foolish *wazir* had fallen from his horse and died in the jungle.

The real king who was in the parrot's body was surprised at the *wazir's* treachery. But what could he do? He had, on his own, entered the body of a bird, and thus made himself vulnerable. He understood the precariousness of the situation he had placed himself in and the risks involved. He gave

the matter a good thought and the only safe place that he could think of was by the side of the *faqir* who had conferred the occult power on him and his treacherous *wazir*. Thither he went.

Meanwhile hundreds of parrots in the kingdom were killed and brought to the imposter. One day the *wazir* decided to go a hunting. He went into the forest, accompanied by a few trusted soldiers. The latter caught a wonderful deer which the *wazir* very much liked. He wanted to carry the beast to the palace to show the royal ladies what he had captured. Therefore he asked his soldiers to be on guard lest the animal should run away. He threatened them with dire consequences if that happened. But as he was uttering his warning, the female deer jumped right over the *wazir's* body and disappeared into the forest.

The *faqir* was indeed a man of wonderful powers. He could not only transfer himself into dead bodies but was also clairvoyant. He knew what was happening elsewhere. He asked the real king (in the parrot's body) to go forth. He told him that he would soon get back his body and the kingdom.

Meanwhile the imposter who had taken such a fancy to the deer decided to pursue it into the heart of the jungle. Accompanied by his soldiers, he ran after it. But the nimblefooted animal soon outdistanced him. Finding the dead body of a bear nearby he entered it to be able to overtake the deer. He ran as fast as he could. Meanwhile his body, (the king's body), fell on the ground when he entered the bear's body. The parrot (the king), who was near, saw this. He at once approached the spot where the dead body lay and entered it. The parrot immediately fell down dead. The king mounted his horse and ordered the soldiers to shoot the bear into whose body the *wazir* had entered. They fired at him with

all their guns. The bear was severely wounded in the leg and could not run or stand. So they easily caught him and brought him before the king. The king said to his *wazir* (inside the bear's body) "You are a traitor and death is the proper punishment for you. I would, however, have spared you. But that is not possible as you have destroyed your own body." The king then fired at the wounded beast *wazir* and he breathed his last.

The king who now fully realised the truth of the *faqir's* remark that 'loyalty is rare', went to his benefactor, fell at his feet, and thanked him profusely for saving him and restoring his kingdom to him.

MAHADEV

Mahadev was a clever thief and though known all over the city for his depredations, he was never caught ; he went about his nefarious trade with great skill and circumspection. At the same time, like his *guru* (teacher), he commanded some respect in society for he was known to have helped some people in need,

especially an unfortunate and indigent widow who had nothing to marry off her grown up daughter with.

Mahadev was a man with a religious bent of mind. He went round the Hari Parbat hill in Srinagar every morning. It was on his way back after the customary



gently blew its contents into his two legs

puja at the Devi's shrine on the hill one day that he fell in with this poor helpless widow who confided in him her tale of woe. Mahadev wanted to help her but had little to offer. So he decided that he would occasionally rob the rich to help the poor. But one cannot become a thief merely by wishing to be one. This nefarious trade also needs training and apprenticeship. Therefore Mahadev went to the master thief of his time, Laiku, for advice and instructions. Laiku who lived at *Kathidarwaza* on the southeast of the sacred hill offered to take him as a pupil if he stood one test. The test was to jump down from the height of the parapet wall bounding the hill and run, as he would sometimes be required to do after burglaries. Mahadev passed the test successfully and trained as a thief by Laiku. In course of time he excelled his teacher but like him, he also occasionally helped people in need from out of what he got through his depredations.

Mahadev's excellence in his trade had earned him a nickname. Once when he was in a rich man's house on his thievish errand the housewife, sleeping by the side of her husband, got awakened. Mahadev mewed like a cat. She cried '*bishta*', '*bishta*', to drive the

cat away and told her husband, who too got awakened, not to bother as it was only a cat that was in the house. Mahadev relieved them of all their cash and gold ornaments and later when this came to be known the sobriquet of '*Bishta*' came to be appended to his name.

Mahadev moved freely in society and though people were well aware of his thievish activities, none dared to challenge or criticise him openly lest he himself should be his next victim.

Mahadev's daring exploits were the talk of the town. One day Mahadev was the subject of discussion in the Maharaja's court.

The Maharaja was an old-world fellow who wore a tome of a turban, a heavy *choga*, embroidered with silk and gold and tight-fitting *chooridars* (trousers) which are a problem to put on and a greater problem to take off. He used to review happenings in his kingdom with his courtiers in an open *darbar* every day before noon. One day Mahadev was the subject of discussion and a number of courtiers were voluble in praise of his daring and skill. But the Maharaja was not impressed. On the contrary, he was disposed to blame

his functionaries for not getting hold of the thief for so long. When some of the courtiers gently remonstrated and said that Mahadev was far too clever to be caught, the Maharaja said derisively, "Let the rascal extend his activities to our palace and he will be taught a lesson which he will remember all his life."

The substance of the discussions at the Maharaja's daily *darbar* gradually found its way into the market-place and was, with exaggerations and understatements, known all over the city in a few days. His challenge to Mahadev became the talk of the town. Soon after Mahadev and his fellow thieves also came to know about it. The latter egged him on to take it up but many among them were doubtful of his success. Mahadev himself, though known for his self-confidence and courage, was hesitant. But it was a case of 'do or be damned for ever' for him. So he took up the challenge and bravely declared that he would get the Maharaja's *chooridars* (trousers), from out of his legs. Some of his followers expressed their doubts about their leader's boast and said so. To them Mahadev retorted, "If I fail, I will have half my moustache shaved off

and will surrender my leadership once for all."

Mahadev realised the immensity of the challenge he had taken up. The palace was heavily guarded with the ruler's own clansmen and as the Kashmiri phrase goes, 'not a fly' could get into it without due authorisation. And to get the very *pyjama* from the legs of the Maharaja was a well-nigh impossible task. So the Kashmiri Robin Hood planned his strategy most carefully. For several days he hovered around the palace. He saw how the palace-guards frequented the shops and shanties lining the long narrow street that led to the palace gate. They came there now and then to have a few puffs at the *narelas* (hubble-bubble). Mahadev struck friendship with some of them and especially with one who was known to press the Maharaja's feet and rub his soles to lull him into sleep.

Mahadev invited him to his place now and then and treated him to choice meat dishes which were taboo in the palace kitchen. At one of these feasts he suggested to his friend that he would like to exchange places with him once so as to be able to see for himself how their beloved and august ruler slept. "But how can you get

in ?" asked the ruler's masseur. "Leave that to me. Only give me a date and I will be there at the appointed time," replied Mahadev.

During his hoverings around the palace Mahadev had found that the only other opening into the wall surrounding the palace, apart from the gate and the *ghat* both of which were heavily guarded, was the open drain which afforded an exit to the waters used in the palace. He chose this passage for his entry. He waded through this stinking drain carrying in a bundle on his head, the masseur's uniform, including a saffron-coloured turban and white *chooridars*.

Once inside the palace compound, Mahadev quickly went into one of the several bath rooms lining it and after a thorough wash clothed himself in the uniform which he had carried on his head. He peeped into the Maharaja's bedroom and to his great delight, found his masseur friend at his work. The ruler had evidently passed into sleep. He beckoned to his friend and exchanged places with him. The Maharaja was in deep slumber, and in the dim light in the room, Mahadev took out from his bosom a piece of flute-like cane which was plugged with

some cotton-wool at both ends. He removed the plugs at both the ends and placing it near the exposed ankles of the sleeping Maharaja, one after the other, he gently blew its contents into his two legs. The crafty burglar had filled the tube with tiny ants and when these vermin found, after their long detention in the tube, their release on the warm, plump legs of the sleeping dandy, they began stinging him all over the legs. The Maharaja became most uncomfortable, turned from side to side, and cursing the man who had made the bed, asked the masseur to pull off his *pyjama*. This was what Mahadev expected. As soon as the *pyjama* was in his hands, he smothered off all the ants with both the hands and the Maharaja was back into sleep as before. The burglar who was dressed as a masseur, entrusted his royal client back into the hands of his masseur friend and left by the palace-gate itself.

Mahadev was soon back at his den, and next morning when he showed the Maharaja's trousers to his fellow-thieves and followers they were astonished. Confirmation of Mahadev's daring exploit was not long in forthcoming from the palace itself. Mahadev thus stood fully vindicated.

their master's mansion in it. But to make sure that their mistress was in it, the cat climbed up to the window while the dog sat quietly on the ground. Their mistress recognised her husband's faithful animal as soon as the cat appeared on the window sill. She was beautiful as usual but drowned in grief. She felt greatly ashamed when she saw the cat. She told her how it was through her folly that things had come to this pass.

"But is there no way out?" asked the cat.

"Yes, if my lord gets back the charmed ring," replied she.

"Where is it?" the cat asked.

"It is in the stomach of the old hag, the ogress," she said adding, "she has kept it there for safety's sake and to hold the prince under her thumb."

"Don't worry! I will get it," said the cat.

While returning from the palace, the cat found a rat hole. An idea struck her. She lay by the rat hole pretending that she was dead. It so happened that a great wedding was taking place among the rats and all the rats of the

neighbourhood were flocking to the place. The son of the king of rats was going to be married. They came and went in and as the cat did not move at all, they thought her dead. But when the bridegroom came out, bedecked for the marriage, the cat pounced upon it. There was a lot of commotion and consternation among the rats. But what could be done against their inveterate enemy. The cat, however, did the rat bridegroom no harm. On the contrary, she offered to let it go if some of them came to her aid. A number of rats immediately volunteered forth and the cat chose the most robust of them for her purpose. She said to it, "The ogress who lives in that house with the prince and his wife, has swallowed a ring which I very much want. If you will procure it for me, I will allow the rat prince to depart unhurt. If you do not, then your prince dies at my feet."

"Very well, we agree," said all of them. "Devour us all, if we do not get you the ring," they added.

The rats are clever and intelligent creatures. They thought over the matter and prepared a plan. About midnight when the ogress was in deep slumber and snoring loudly, one of the rats got upon

her chest, moved near her face and inserted its long tail into her throat, whereupon the old hag coughed violently, and vomitted out all that there was in her stomach. With it came out the magic ring. As soon as it fell on the floor, the rat picked it up and ran to the cat to hand over the ring. The cat released the rat prince and rushed to her companion, the dog. But that was not the end of the woe of their master. On their way to the merchant's son, the cat and the dog had to cross a stream. The cat rode on the back of the dog who held the ring in his mouth. Inadvertently, the dog opened his mouth and as the ring dropped into the stream it was swallowed by a fish.

The dog was grief-stricken but the cat did not lose her nerve. She pounced upon a king fisher and through it threatened the fish in the stream with annihilation if they failed to return the ring. The fish community immediately handed back the ring.

This was hardly a lesson for the dog for he was careless enough to lose the ring for a second time. This time it was picked by a kite and once again the intelligent cat succeeded in retrieving it. She located the kite's nest and waited till it was dark. Stealthily the cat went up the tree, killed the kite and got back the ring.

The dog was deeply ashamed of himself but the cat urged him to hurry as all these delays were about to bring the one month's time limit to an end. "Do not waste time over what is past," she said, "if we do not reach in time, our master will kill himself."

With the deadline approaching fast, they at last made it to their master. The merchant's son immediately spoke to the ring and ordered that his wife and the mansion be at once brought back to him.

There was great rejoicing at the reunion and everybody was happy.

HAYAT BAND AND ZOHRA KHOTAN

There once lived a wealthy merchant whom a kindly Providence had favoured with all the good things of life, including a most accomplished and virtuous wife. But for many years after their marriage, the blessed couple lacked one thing only. They had no issue, and in particular, no male issue who would carry on the business when the merchant grew old ; who could inherit his vast riches and continue the family line after his death. These thoughts troubled their minds constantly.

The merchant and his wife were god-fearing people. They went to places of worship and kept fasts and offered sacrifices to invoke divine grace to fulfil their cherished desire. They resorted to *pirs* and *faqirs* also and gave large sums of money in charity.

Their prayers and good deeds were not in vain. At long last they did get a lovely child, a son. There was much jubilation and feasting

in the merchant's house and hundreds of beggars and needy were fed and clothed. The new arrival was named *Hayat Band* and brought up with all care and affection.

To equip him suitably for the future, the child was sent to school when he was about six years old. And to provide him company, both in the school and at home, the merchant brought in two small boys whom he found outside his shop one day. As they had neither father nor mother, no kith and kin or anyone else to look after them, he felt that they would make good company for his beloved child, besides being of some use at the shop occasionally. He put them also in the school, along with Hayat.

But the merchant's favour was lost on the two wretches. While Hayat devoted himself to his books and tried hard to learn more and more the two street urchins took little interest in their studies. On

the contrary, they learnt all kinds of wickedness and mischief, from boys of the same character in the school. And as Hayat would not associate with them in such activities, they came to hate him.

As he grew up, Hayat's parents naturally thought of marrying him. Messengers were sent out in different directions to find a suitable bride for him. Soon his marriage was fixed with the daughter of wealthy parents. She

was handsome, wise and virtuous. This, however, was not to the liking of the two boys whom the merchant had literally picked up from the street. They became very jealous of Hayat and began plotting to somehow disrupt the marriage.

On the eve of the appointed day for the marriage, Hayat Band's wicked companions went to his father-in-law and told him that his son-in-law was demented and



They administer a stupefying drug to the bridegroom

his daughter's future would be sealed if she was married to such a lout. This evil report caused great gloom and dismay at the bride's place and her father would have broken off the engagement if it was not too late and all the arrangements had not been made.

This set back did not dissuade the boys from further mischief ; so angry were they that they were being left unmarried while the merchant's son, whom they had come to regard as their equal, was being married. They hurried to the merchant's place early next morning and administered a stupefying drug to the bridegroom just as he was about to leave for his father-in-law's place.

They wanted to leave nothing to chance. They tried to poison the ears of the merchant and his wife also. They went and told them that they had just returned from a visit to the bride's place and found that she was an ogress who devoured human beings. This was a blow to the merchant and his wife but as the marriage procession was about to start, they did not think it proper to break off the match.

The bride's father closely scrutinised his would-be son-in-law

when the marriage party arrived at his place. And finding Hayat Band somewhat sleepy and stupid he thought of calling off the engagement even at this late stage when there was yet time. He made his mind known to his wife, who was dumbfounded. But when their wise daughter named Zohra came to know this she felt there was some foul play. She remonstrated with her parents and told them that she would marry Hayat Band alone and not suffer the shame and humiliation of a broken marriage just it was about to be solemnized.

Zohra Khotan, as the girl came to be called after marriage, was proved right in her assessment. For on the morrow when the stupefying effect of the drug had worn off, Hayat Band was his affable, normal self again who enlivened the assembled guests at his father-in-law's place with his wit, wisdom and humour.

After spending a few days at his in-law's, as was the custom in those parts, Hayat Band decided to return home together with his wife. But as it was a long distance away he decided to do the journey in two or three days.

Zohra Khotan was so engrossed in sweet company of her loving husband that she forgot to bring a suitable present for her mother-in-law. She felt very sorry about this lapse on her part and was very much worried about it. On her first night on the journey to her husband's home she had a dream wherein she was asked to proceed to the nearby stream next morning, remove the golden bracelet from the dead woman who would come floating down and make a present of it to her mother-in-law, when she got home.

Next morning when she rose up she went to the river. Things happened exactly as she had dreamt. A woman's corpse came floating down and seeing a golden bracelet on its arm, she removed it and returned to where they were quartered for the night.

Hayat Band's wicked companions were very sore that their whole mischievous plan had misfired. But they did not relent in their efforts to bring about a disruption of his marriage. They had been closely following and watching the couple. They were witness to how Zohra Khotan got the golden bracelet. This gave them an idea. They at once went to the

slaughterhouse from where they got some freshly spilled blood and sprinkled it on the riverside and the path which Zohra Khotan had taken. They then hurried to the merchant's house and told him of the latest exploit of his daughter-in-law whom they had already described as an ogress.

The merchant and his wife were at first not disposed to believe the two wicked boys but when the maidservant, accompanying Zohra Khotan, confirmed that her mistress had gone to the riverside in the morning, they, as also their son, Hayat Band, felt that what the rogues said must after all be the truth. The husband considered himself lucky that he had found out the truth about his wife well in time and decided that he would have nothing to do with her henceforth.

Poor Zohra Khotan was lodged in a room by herself where food and drink was served to her by a maidservant. Nobody any longer associated or communicated with her.

Hayat Band cut off all contact with his wife and attended his father's shop along with his two

wicked companions. But to be parted from a young handsome wife is not very pleasing to a young man just married. Hayat Band was therefore very sad and pensive both at home and at the shop. He grew weak and emaciated. This was unbearable to his fond parents. To divert his mind, his father decided to send him to another country on a business tour. His two wicked companions, who had now come to be looked upon as sincere friends, were sent with him.

Their destination was rather far. The merchant, therefore, gave his son a lot of money. But when they had gone some distance, Hayat Band suddenly remembered that they had left behind some important papers. He, therefore, decided to go back home and collect the same, after making adequate provision for the board and lodging of his two companions till his return by giving them a handsome amount of money. When he was back home, Hayat Band, one day, decided to peep into the room in which his wife was lodged. She looked more beautiful in sorrow than ever before. Innocent as she was, Hayat Band's heart was filled with loving compassion. He went in and held her in tight embrace. His misunderstandings were all cleared and he extended his stay at

home to be able to enjoy her sweet company as long as he could.

On return to his wicked companions he found that they had been indulging in drinking and gambling and had squandered away all the money. He was angry and threatened that he would report to his father against them. This enraged the rogues and they decided to wreak vengeance on him.

Hayat Band's wicked companions had come to know from him how he had lived with his wife, Zohra Khotan, when he went home and they decided to make use of this information to avenge themselves. They donned the robe of *faqirs* and went to the merchant and told him that his daughter-in-law was unchaste, that she was unfaithful and had conceived.

These words from the holy men were taken as true by the merchant and his wife. The mother-in-law asked Zohra Khotan herself if she was carrying a baby. She confessed but said that she was innocent and not an ogress.

Now that the merchant was convinced that his daughter-in-law was not only an ogress but also ill-charactered he decided to get rid of her for good before his son

returned. He, therefore, approached the appropriate authorities and had, with great difficulty, orders issued for her execution.

The executioners took Zohra Khotan to a jungle where her head was to be chopped off. But she

earnestly pleaded with them to spare her as she was absolutely innocent. But they would not relent. She then requested them to allow her to offer prayers before death; they granted her request. When she was at her prayers her innocence and earnestness



They decided to let her off

brought about a miraculous change in the minds of the executioners and they decided to let her off. But they asked her not to return to the town from where she had come.

The executioners returned to the city and Zohra Khotan continued to live in the jungle. It was a very trying period for her, especially as she was pregnant. After sometime she left the jungle and went to another town where she sought shelter with a widow. She would pick up faggots and do other chores by day and spend the night with the widow. It was in the widow's hut that Zohra Khotan gave birth to a lovely little boy.

It so happened that the queen of the realm in which the widow lived, was also delivered of a baby on the same night. But she gave birth to a baby-daughter. The queen already had a number of daughters and the king had threatened her with execution if she brought forth one more female child. She therefore kept the birth of her daughter a closely guarded secret and sent some trusted maidservants to get her a male child born about the same time.

One of the queen's confidants came to know of the birth of a male child in the widow's house. She persuaded the old hag to part with the child for a fat sum of money and brought him to the queen. There was much festivity and jubilation in the capital when the queen made it known that she had given birth to a boy.

The widow was a wicked and crafty woman. She got a number of stones and placed one of them in the basket in which Zohra Khotan used to place her baby when she went out. The others she placed in a cupboard nearby. When Zohra Khotan returned and looked for her darling, she was startled to find a stone in his place in the basket. She asked the widow where her son was. The heartless lady said that he had turned into stone, as her own children had turned from time to time. She opened the cupboard and showed her the stones placed in it.

Zohra Khotan wept bitterly. She was mad with grief at the loss of her only child. She was completely disgusted with the world—a world so cruel, so bitter and so harsh to her! She gave up food and drink for a number of days. But

there was no remedy against fate, she thought, and ultimately resumed her daily chores.

Meanwhile Zohra Khotan's son grew up rapidly in the palace. Some years passed, and one day when he happened to be near the widow's hut, he saw his mother outside it. Of course, he knew not his relationship with her but was greatly impressed by her grace and beauty. On return to the palace, he told the king—'his father'—that he had seen a very beautiful woman in a nearby town.

The king, who had Zohra Khotan brought to the palace, was also greatly struck by her beauty and wanted to take her as one of his wives. But this she would not agree to as, she said, she belonged to another. At the king's persuasion, however, she promised to marry him if her husband did not turn up for six months more.

Hayat Band was away from home for many years. He visited many countries and earned a lot. He was very wealthy merchant in his own right when he returned. He hoped to find his beloved wife cleared of all baseless charges. So one could imagine his grief when he was told that she was not only an

ogress but also ill-charactered and so had been got executed by the order of the king's *wazir*. He was dumbfounded with grief as he knew it only too well that his wife was not ill-charactered and that he was the father of the baby.

After some time when he regained his composure somewhat he decided to trace out his wife's executioners to know how she had been disposed of. At first they told him that they had faithfully carried out the *wazir's* order and executed her. But finding Hayat Band very much concerned about her cruel fate, they told him how her innocence and earnestness had melted their hearts and they had let her go.

"Where did she go?" asked Hayat Band anxiously.

"Into the yonder jungle," said the executioners.

Taking some money with himself Hayat Band went to the jungle and ransacked it from one end to the other. But no trace of Zohra Khotan could be found anywhere. Then he decided to visit the villages and towns adjoining the forest as he felt that she must ultimately have gone to one of them to live in. At last he came to know that a very

handsome woman, forsaken by her husband, was living in a widow's hut in a town at one end of the jungle. He bent his steps thither.

While on his way to the town Hayat Band came across a royal messenger from whom he learnt that he was carrying costly clothes and jewellery, etc. to the palace, for the ruler of the realm was going to marry a poor, fair and forsaken woman named Zohra. Hayat Band was extremely happy to know that his beloved wife was yet alive but was sad to learn that the king had taken a fancy to her and was about to take her into the *harem*. He persuaded the royal messenger to take him to the palace and through him sent his signet ring to his wife. Zohra Khotan at once recognised the favourite ring of her husband. She rushed out of the room and fell at the feet of her long lost husband. Hayat Band lifted her and clasped

her in tight embrace. Both shed tears of joy on their reunion.

The king was disappointed to lose a most lovely woman but as he was a god-fearing person he was happy that he was responsible for the reunion of two lovers whom cruel fate had long separated from each other. In fact he held a feast in celebration of their coming together again. It was at this joyous feast that their son was restored to Khoja Hayat Band and Zohra Kohtan. When the truth about the queen's getting a son was revealed to the king, he had his wife and the cruel widow sent for. He severely reprimanded the former and ordered the latter to be executed. And to make amends for the wrong that had been done to Zohra Khotan through his wife's anxiety to present to him a male child, he decided to marry his eldest daughter to the son of Khoja Hayat Band and Zohra Khotan.

WICKED PRIEST

The young priest was clever and crafty and would stop at nothing to keep his flock under his strict yoke. The unscrupulous fellow had succeeded to his office only recently on the demise of his father whose erudition and knowledge, kindness and compassion, had won him the esteem and affection of the people of not his own village only but of the other surrounding villages also. In fact these other villages too had chosen him as their chief priest. There was hardly any religious ceremony or social function like marriage, tonsure, etc., to which he was not invited or about which he was not consulted. When he passed away these duties automatically devolved on his successor. But the chief priest's son was the antithesis of his venerable old father and, therefore, he was all the more particular to retain his hold over the locality.

The young priest lived in a picturesque small village at the fringe of a dense forest. A stream flowed nearby and it was the main artery

to float down the forest timber. As the village comprised only a few households most of the youngmen in it had to find employment outside their native habitation. Some of them went to the forest and some others to the neighbouring villages for their livelihood. One of the youngmen belonging to the priest's village had taken up the work of a pedlar. Naturally this brought him face to face with most of the villagers, especially the women and children.

It so happened that the parents of a village belle took a fancy to the itinerant pedlar and they decided to give their youthful daughter to him in marriage.

They obtained his parents' approval and the marriage was duly solemnized but with little pomp or ceremony. The bride's village being some miles away the bridegroom's father took none but his close relations with him. The village priest was also excluded.

The young priest took it as a great affront, an insult and a dangerous precedent. For if the other people followed this example, he argued in his mind, he would turn pauper before long. He must therefore teach the rustics a lesson.

An opportunity to do so came presently. Since he had not been able to include any of his neighbours, including the village priest, in the marriage procession of his son, the bridegroom's father decided to hold a reception at his place after the marriage party returned home. He personally went to invite the priest. The latter accepted the invitation but not without making a reference to his exclusion from the bridal party.

The priest was duly welcomed as he came to attend the reception. But he was not his usual buoyant self. He had adopted a somewhat stiff and grave posture.

Soon after he was led into the bride's room to give her his benediction. As he entered, the other ladies left the room. The bride bowed respectfully and sat before him with downcast eyes. He had a full view of her handsome face. He suddenly grew serious and glum and said

to the bridegroom's parents, "Take her away from my presence." As the bride was led into another room, he said to her parents-in-law, "You have not done well to go in for this alliance. This bride is inauspicious and will spell ruin to the family."

This was like a thunderbolt for the bridegroom's parents. His mother fell at the priest's feet, imploring him to do something to save her family from the impending doom. But the priest shook his head, adding, "I can do nothing in this matter. Her influence is most pernicious and evil for you, your husband, and your son."

The husband joined his wife in supplicating the priest to help stave off the dangers to them.

"There is only one way out," he said very seriously, and added, "that is to send her away."

"But how can we do so? What will people think of us if we do that?" said the frightened mother-in-law.

"Well, that is for you to consider. Why did you marry him without consulting someone who knows these things?" said the priest. "Her presence in the house bodes very ill for you, for your

husband, and above all, for the apple of your eye, your only son," he added after a slight pause.

"What shall we do then ? Please save us somehow from the dire consequences you foresee for us," said the pedlar's mother.

The priest said in a low voice, "The best way to do away with her is to put her in a wooden box and float it down the nearby stream at dead of night. You can give out that she went out at night and did not return." The priest then went away.

The pedlar's fond parents were doubtful if their son would agree to the course advised by the wily priest. So they sent him away to a distant village on an urgent errand. When he was gone, his parents, with the help of some trusted relations, gagged the young bride, bound her tight hand and foot and placed her in a tight-fitting wooden box which they floated down the stream at dead of night. All the ornaments that the bride had brought were also placed in the box as the priest had said that their presence in the house was also fraught with dire consequences for the family and therefore they too should be put in the wooden

box with the inauspicious bride.

The poor girl was simply dazed when they gagged her and tied her hand and foot. She despaired of her life when they bundled her into the wooden box. She could not make out where she was when they put the box on the water and it began to be tossed about from side to side. She could not raise a cry ; she was so securely gagged that she could hardly breathe. She fainted and was brought back to consciousness when the floating box suddenly struck ground and its onward motion came to a halt. She was wondering what had happened when she heard some human voices. Was a worse fate in store for her ? She wondered.

Presently the box was pulled ashore and its lid opened. In the dim light of the rising moon the poor unfortunate woman saw two men. Were they thieves or robbers ? And would she be killed or sold into slavery ? She did not know. When the two men saw the fair inmate in the box they were surprised beyond measure. They at once suspected some foul-play and told the frightened lady to have no fear,

they would do her no harm. The bride who was dumb with fear, did not know what was happening. But once reassured that she had fallen into humane hands she burst into a Niagara of tears and in response to the queries of her rescuers she sobbed out her heart-rending story.

One of the two men who stood near her remarked that it must all be the mischief of the village priest. "He is a rascal!" he added. "We should teach him a lesson"; he said to his companion.

The two men earned their living by catching monkeys in the forest and, after taming, selling them to itinerant beggars who went about with them from village to village to earn their keep by regaling the villagers with the tamed monkey's tricks and antics. They were on their way back from the forest where they had succeeded in trapping a hefty wild monkey. They decided to put him into the wooden box in place of the woman and float it down. They were sure that the torture of the unfortunate lady whom they had rescued was the handiwork of the wicked priest and rightly felt that the rascal would be waiting for

the box in his village lower down the stream.

And this indeed was so. The covetous priest had been lying in wait for it from late in the evening. When, according to his calculation, there was delay in its arrival, he got apprehensive. But he continued to remain on the river bank, expecting the coveted prize any moment. His heart buoyed up when, in the dim light of the rising moon, he espied something floating on the bosom of the placid stream. He waded some distance into the shallow stream by the bank and with a long pole drew the box towards himself. He soon got it upon the bank and opened its lid. He had perhaps hoped to find the fair lady and to take her with all her belongings to his home. But what was his surprise when on opening the lid there sprang up an enraged monkey who played havoc with him. The angry beast jumped and struck him right and left and clawed and mauled him till he was bleeding all over his face and limbs. The monkey then escaped into the wilderness.

Next morning the story of how the wicked priest had got his due punishment was known all over



There sprang up an enraged monkey who played havoc with him

the place and when the innocent bride's rescuers restored her to her husband, she was welcomed with open arms. Her parents-in-law

apologised to her for the wrong done to her and sent away her rescuers with a handsome reward.

HEEMAL NAGRAI

Sada Ram was a poor Brahman who was hard put to it to make both ends meet. And as though the pangs of hunger were not enough, he had for his wife a woman with a very sharp tongue. This she used devastatingly against her husband who was both indigent and indolent.

Sada Ram's wife was not innately vile, but like other young women she would also like to live in ease and comfort and bedeck herself with finery and ornaments. But these her poor husband could ill-afford. Even two square meals a day were not assured in her husband's house. This had made her ill-tempered and impatient and the poor husband had to suffer the shafts of her sharp tongue whenever he was at home.

One day Sada Ram's wife came to know that a big *yajna* was taking place in the King's palace. It was usual on such occasions for the ruler to distribute large sums of money, sizeable quantities of cereals and clothes in charity

to Brahmans and mendicants. Sada Ram's wife coaxed her slothful spouse to go to the function to receive whatever might fall to his lot. Contrary to her wont, she put together a few things that he would need on his journey to the palace which was some miles away.

It was a hot summer day and Sada Ram reluctantly started on his trek. By noontide he felt a little weary and finding a spring of clear water under a shady tree he decided to rest for some time. He took a little of the *sattu*, which his wife had thoughtfully put in his thick woollen bag, and gulping down a few handfuls of refreshingly cool water from the spring he lay down to relax for a while. He soon dozed off, his bag, stick and shoes lying by his side.

In those good old days thieves and thefts were unheard of. Nobody would lift any one else's things, wherever they lay. So when Sada Ram woke up he found his things lying beside him as he

had left them. He hastily put on his grass shoes and picked up the stick. But when he bended to lift the bag, he felt it to be heavy. Peering in, he found a serpent coiled up in it. He started back with a jerk but suddenly remembered his nagging wife and her taunts and abuses. An idea struck him. Instead of continuing the journey to the palace, he decided to return home and make a present of the deadly snake to his wife. He tied

up the bag carefully, threw it up over his shoulder and wended his steps back to his miserable little hut.

Sada Ram's wife was wild with rage when she saw her husband nearing the hut. She understood that he had not proceeded to the palace to partake of the Raja's charity. She thundered at him : "So you have come back empty-handed today also. But



Here is a precious present for you

what will you eat here, your heart or kidney ?”

Taking hold of the bag slung over his shoulder, Sada Ram handed it to his wife. He said, “Here is a precious present for you. Go inside and take it out.”

Sada Ram’s wife was not accustomed to receiving presents from her poor husband. She hastily took the bag from his hand and went inside.

Sada Ram closed the door behind her and expectantly waited outside with his ear to the door.

A handsome little snake lept out of the bag as Sada Ram’s wife opened it. She was terribly frightened. A loud shriek escaped her lips. She was about to shout for help when the deadly serpent miraculously changed into a handsome little boy, who accosted her with the words, “Don’t be afraid, mother. I will do you no harm.”

Sada Ram’s wife who was childless, was very glad to be addressed as ‘mother’. She rushed to the door to convey the good news to her husband. But the door was bolted from outside. She shouted, “Sada Rama ! God has blessed you ! See what a boon He has conferred on us !”

“Let it sting you ! Let it sting you to death and let not my eyes see it,” shouted back her exasperated husband.

As the door did not open for some time, the lady went on shouting, “Sada Rama ! O, Sada Rama ! God has blessed you ! See what a boon He has bestowed on us !”

Sada Ram was baffled. He had fondly hoped that the serpent would silence for ever the shrew of his wife but here she was, alive and active, and shouting with joy. He opened the door a little to find out for himself. And what was his surprise when he found his wife holding a lovely child in her lap and the room bathed in a bright lustre with his presence !

Sada Ram was happy beyond measure. God had indeed been kind to them. He went in, took the boy in his arms and hugged and kissed him. The taunts and sallies of his wife were forgotten and the two decided to name their God-given child as Nagrai, or King of Serpents.

Nagrai grew up like the waxing moon. His good looks and intelligence impressed whomsoever he came into contact with. He brought good luck to his parents

and gone were the days of penury and privation for them.

From his very childhood Nagrai was fond of pools and springs. When he grew up he asked his father one day to take him to the loveliest spring to bathe in. Sada Ram told him that the best spring in the locality was in the palace garden and meant exclusively for the princess, named Heemal. It was heavily guarded by the maidservants of the princess and no male dare approach it.

This aroused Nagrai's curiosity all the more and one day when Sada Ram was away, he went to the palace, changed over into a snake and slipped into the garden through a hole in the enclosing wall. Having thus given a slip to the palace guards he again changed over into the lovely youth that he had by now grown up into and bathed in the princess's spring to his heart's content. Soon after he slipped out, as he had come in (as a snake), through an opening in the enclosing wall.

Heemal was surprised to find water splashed on the sides of the spring when she came to bathe in it with her maidservants. She was very angry that her private pool should have been defiled in

this way and severely reprimanded the maids. She asked them to mount a constant vigil to find out who it was that had the audacity to bathe in her spring.

The maidservants had not long to wait for this, for Nagrai repeated his visit in a few days and as he was going out of the palace garden one of the maid servants caught sight of him and followed him to his house. Heemal too had a glimpse of the lovely youth. She had never before come across such a handsome young man. She at once fell in love with him and decided to marry him. Therefore when the maid reported that the person who bathed in the spring of the princess was a youth named Nagrai, Heemal was not angry. On the contrary, she evinced a lot of interest in him. She was evidently relieved to know that he lived not far away and was the son of a Brahman.

Heemal was a grown-up girl and her royal parents were on the lookout for a suitable match for her. She went to her mother and told her that she had come across a comely youth who would be the most suitable life-partner for her. She had decided to marry him and none else, she told her mother.

Being the only daughter of her parents, the queen was not averse to their daughter marrying a man of her choice, especially as Heemal assured her mother that the man she had in mind was a most accomplished and well-built youth who would be the envy of any princess. But the King was furious when the queen conveyed their daughter's wish to him.

"How can I, a king, give my daughter in marriage to the son of a commoner?" he said to his wife.

"What would my brother princes, and even my subjects, think of me if I married my lovely daughter, brought up with all care and comfort, to the son of a poor brahman?" he thought in his mind.

He said to his wife, "I will have all the grown up princes from the neighbouring countries brought here and let our beloved daughter, Heemal, make her choice from amongst them. But I simply cannot allow this marriage with a nondescript commoner's son."

But Heemal's decision was finally made and there was no going back on it. She gave up food and drink and confined herself to her room. She grew very weak and emacia-

ted. Her fond parents grew very anxious and ultimately her father was constrained to give his consent to this un-equal alliance.

Sada Ram was sent for. The poor man was filled with all kinds of fears and apprehensions when he received the royal summons. "Had the king come to know of Nagrai's clandestine visits to the palace garden?" he mused. "Or, was it some other inadvertence on his own Nagrai's part that had attracted the royal attention? Or was it the sudden turn in his fortune?" Such were the thoughts and fears that filled his mind when Sada Ram was ushered into the king's august presence.

The king was sadly disappointed when he saw Sada Ram. He heaved a deep sigh when he found the poor Brahman, cowering and trembling before him.

Was it the son of this poor wretch that his beloved daughter had set her heart upon as her life-mate? No. No. He would not allow his daughter to ruin herself by going in for this marriage, he said to himself.

He sent for his wife and told her once again that he would not allow his beloved daughter to

marry a mendicant Brahman's son. But the queen knew that Heemal was not to be deflected from her resolve to marry Nagrai and told him so. She said to him, "If we don't allow her to marry the man of her choice, our beloved Heemal would soon be no more, she would fast herself unto death."

The king who loved the princess very much, ultimately brought himself round to approving Heemal's choice.

The ground slipped from under Sada Ram's feet when the king told him that he wanted to marry his daughter to his son, Nagrai.

"How can it be that the princess, your beloved daughter will marry a poor Brahman's son? How could we, who live on your charity, aspire to equality with you? No. No. Sir, my son Nagrai is altogether unworthy of the hand of your exalted Highness's peerless daughter," said Sada Ram.

But the king had already up his mind since Heemal wished it so, and the poor Brahman dared not go against the wishes of the lord of the land.

He returned home with a number of costly presents from the palace and told his wife about the king's

decision. She was also taken aback at first but soon felt elated that she would have the peerless princess as her daughter-in-law.

The date for the marriage was drawing near and brisk preparations were afoot in the palace. But Sada Ram's house presented a dismal appearance. The poor Brahman was enveloped in gloom. He did not know what to do. He could not lead his son's marriage procession to the palace as a pauper and thus bring disgrace upon his liegeland. But what could he do? He had not the resources to celebrate the marriage as a royal wedding should be celebrated.

Nagrai understood Sada Ram's predicament and said to him, "Dear father! Please don't worry. Leave the arrangements to me; everything will be all right at the proper time."

But nothing was being done by Nagrai although only a few days were left for the marriage to be solemnized. Sada Ram was very sad and dejected when the actual date of the marriage dawned. But soon Nagrai approached and gave him a piece of brick-bark inscribed with some message. He asked him to drop it

into the spring from which he had risen.

Sada Ram did as bid, and turned back to return home. But when he was near where his house stood, he could not find it. In its place there was a palatial building. There was much hustle and bustle. The route to the glittering mansion was lined with uniformed men and richly caparisoned horses and elephants. Bands were playing and groups of ladies were singing. Is it some powerful, potentate come to claim the hand of Heemal, who was put up the new palace miraculously in place of his humble cottage. Sada Ram was musing thus when Nagrai, dressed like a prince, approached him with a smile on his face. "Are you satisfied, now, dear father?" said he to Sada Ram and personally took him inside where he was dressed in clothes befitting the father of a prince. Soon the bridal procession started for the palace.

The king did not believe his eyes when he saw the magnificent procession at the head of which rode Nagrai in right royal manner. The queen was beside herself with joy but the happiest was Heemal. Nagrai was clothed in costly silks and satins and bedecked with necklaces of jewels

and pearls of incomparable beauty.

The marriage was solemnized with great pomp and pageantry. There was great joy and festivity all over the land and for several days Brahmans and beggars were fed and given alms as never before.

Soon after marriage, the newly-wed couple moved into a new palatial building which the bride's father had put up for them. They started living together happily but alas, their happiness was short-lived.

Nagrai was a *Naga* serpent chief before he came up on the earth. In the nether world where he lived earlier, he was married to a number of serpent wives. His prolonged absence caused them much disquiet and consternation. They did not like being deserted in this manner and decided to launch a thorough search for him. For this purpose they decided to come up by turns, assume human form and roam about in all directions to find him out.

One day one of Nagrai's serpent-wives came to know that he was married to the king's daughter and was living with her in the vicinity of

the palace. Next morning she came up again with a number of exquisite gold ornaments and a favourite cup of Nagrai. She went about as a pedlar, hawking her rich wares. She deliberately hovered about the mansion in which Heemal lived. The princess who heard her cries, had brought in. She was wonderstruck with the beauty and grace of the costly ornaments which the pedlar woman was prepared to give away at throw-away prices. She particularly fancied the exquisitely chiselled gold cup, little knowing that it had been her husband's favourite in the nether world.

In the evening when Nagrai returned Heemal enthusiastically showed him what she had purchased at so little cost. She presented the gold cup to him, hoping that Nagrai would be happy to receive it.

Nagrai at once recognised his favourite cup of the nether world and understood that his serpent-wives had come to know about his marriage and whereabouts and would no longer allow him to live in peace with Heemal. Instead of being pleased and thanking his wife, Nagrai was very angry. He smashed the gold cup and forbade

Heemal to have anything to do with such base and deceitful women.

When the stratagem failed to produce the desired result, another Nagin, or serpent wife of Nagrai came up. She had wrapped herself as a cobbler and hawked ladies' sandals. Heemal had her brought in by one of her maidservants. She was fascinated by the costly sandals, embroidered with gold and silver thread which the cobbler woman carried for sale. Heemal purchased a number of them.

In the midst of their conversation the cobbler woman deftly let drop some remarks to convey that Nagrai was not a high caste prince.

Adopting a sad and forlorn posture, she said to Heemal, "Haven't you seen my husband, the cobbler Nagrai?"

"Nagrai! Your husband! No! No! That can't be. You are mistaken. He is my husband. He is a Brahman. He is the son of Brahman Sada Ram," Heemal retorted.

"I do not know about that. All I know is that Nagrai is my

husband and like me a sweeper-cobbler by caste," the serpent woman said.

Heemal's pretty face was aglow with rage. The Nagin felt that her words were having their effect and added, "If you don't believe what I say, ask Nagrai to prove his caste. Ask him to have a dip in the yonder milk spring. If he submerges himself completely know that he is a Brahman ; otherwise not."

The cobbler-woman left but her words continued to ring in Heemal's ears. Would not the base creature go about spreading the lie about Nagrai's humble origin ? Ultimately it would reach the ears of her fond parents and they would feel disgraced to hear it alleged that the princess had been married to a low-caste cobbler. No ! No ! She would not allow that to happen. She would nip the evil in the bud.

Heemal told Nagrai about what had transpired between her and the cobbler woman and how the latter had insinuated that he was not a high caste Brahman.

"Didn't I ask you not to have anything to do with these vile women ?" Nagrai said. "Why do

you give her words any credence?" he added.

"But, my darling, she will go on repeating the lie and bring disgrace to us and my parents. Why don't you undergo a simple test to prove your caste ?" said Heemal.

Nagrai : "What's it ?"

Heemal : "Darling, have a dip in the yonder milk spring, as you do in the other springs every day and when you emerge from it your high caste would have been established. The cobbler woman said that you would not go under water if you belonged to the same caste as she."

Nagrai was deeply distressed. He angrily said to Heemal, "Did I not ask you to keep away from these evil creatures ?"

But Heemal was adamant. She had no doubt in her mind that her husband was a high caste Brahman. She, therefore, saw no reason why he should hesitate to undergo the simple test. He was having a bath in one spring or the other every day.

Ultimately they both went to the milk spring. The serpent wives of Nagrai were already lying in wait in it. As soon as Nagrai put

his feet into it, they caught hold of them and began pulling him downwards. Again and again Nagrai asked Heemal, if she was satisfied so that he might come out. But she wanted a conclusive proof of his caste. So he went down progressively from ankles to the knees; from knees to the thighs; from the thighs to the waist; from the waist to the breast; and from breast to the head. But Heemal would not be satisfied. She wanted him to let the milk overflow his head. With a deep sigh he did so. Heemal realised the gravity of the situation when only the tuft of hair on his head remained above the surface. She desperately pulled at it till it came away. But Nagrai was lost to her. She wept and wailed and pulled at her hair. But all in vain. She returned to her palatial home. But without Nagrai it was like a haunted house. It seemed lightless and desolate.

Heemal's grief was beyond words. She cursed herself, for her own stupidity was her undoing. In atonement of her folly she embarked upon a course of prayers and penance. She distributed in alms all that she had till only a golden mortar and pestle remained with her.

One evening a poor old man with his small daughter approached her for alms. Though she had little left to give, she offered them shelter for the night.

The old man related to her a strange occurrence that he had been witness to the night before. He and his daughter had taken shelter in the hollow of a tree by the side of a spring. As the night advanced and his daughter was fast asleep, he heard a strange noise. Soon a king emerged from the spring followed by a big retinue. The followers divided themselves into groups, who undertook various jobs. Some of them swept the ground, some sprinkled water, and some others spread costly matting and carpets over it. The king and his principal followers sat on the carpeted ground while a meal of many dishes was prepared by the cooks. There was a religious rite like a sacrifice and the whole function concluded with a grand dinner.

Dinner over, all except the king, returned to the spring. The king had a plate of food in his hand. As soon as his followers were gone, he shouted, "Is there any poor man here?" "On hearing this," the old man said, "I and my daughter went forward. As the

king handed the plate of food to me, he said, 'This is in foolish Heemal's name.' Then he too returned to the spring and all was quiet and calm as before."

Heemal was greatly interested in what the old man stated. She understood that the king was no other than her own Nagrai. She gave the old man the last piece of her valuable property—the golden mortar and pestle—and begged of him to take her to the spot where he had been the day before. The beggar did so and went away.

Heemal hid herself in the hollow of the tree beside the spring. At midnight Nagrai and his followers came up from the spring, as the old man had related. Heemal waited with bated breath till the sacrifice and the feast were over and Nagrai's followers had disappeared back into the spring. As soon as he held forth the plate of food in her name, she left forward and fell at his feet and clasped his legs. She pleaded, "Nagrai, O, my beloved husband, forgive me for my folly and come back to me. I can no longer live without you. O, my lord, do come back to me."

Nagrai was happy to see his beloved Heemal. He was, however, in a fix. He knew that his

serpent wives would kill her if he took her with him, and going with her at this stage was impossible. He said to Heemal, "You may go back now. I will come again and take."

But Heemal would not lose him again. She said in reply. "No, never! I cannot leave you. If you can't come with me, I will go with you."

Nagrai was again in a fix. His serpent wives would kill her if he took Heemal with him. On the other hand, Heemal would not agree to be left behind. He considered the whole matter coolly and hit upon a plan. He decided to convert Heemal into a pebble which he hid in his turban and carried to his Naga abode in the nether world.

Nagrai was as usual greeted by his serpent wives but soon they felt him somewhat different. They smelt something human about him and told him so.

Nagrai at first denied this but ultimately on a solemn promise that they would do her no harm, he revealed that he had Heemal with him. He gave her the human form once again.

Nagrai's serpent wives were wonderstruck when they saw her heavenly beauty. They grew jealous of her, but as they were under oath not to do her any harm, they allowed her to remain with them in the nether world. They did not do her any physical injury but burdened her with all the household drudgery. In particular she was required to look after their numerous progeny and feed them.

One day when Heemal had boiled milk for their breakfast, she accidentally hit one of the shallow metal kitchen utensils with the ladle. The newly born serpents mistook the sound for the usual signal for their morning feed. They rushed to the kitchen and fell upon the shallow basins into which she had poured the milk to cool. They drank off the boiling hot milk and died on the spot.

The serpent women were mad with grief when they saw their tender children dead. They fell upon her en masse and stung her again and again. Poor Heemal was dead.

Nagrai was overwhelmed with grief when he returned. But he was helpless. His serpent wives too were not altogether to

blame. He gave Heemal's dead body the customary funeral bath and carried it overland for cremation. But his love for his wife was so great that he decided against its cremation. Instead he embalmed her dead body and hung it up on a tree on a suitable bed. He would visit the place every day to have a glimpse of the lovely form.

One day a holy man passed that way and seeing a bed hung from a tree, he went up to see what it contained. He was wonderstruck to see the lovely corpse lying in it. He was filled with pity for the dead person and prayed to God to restore her to life. His prayers were answered and Heemal was restored to life. He then took her to his own hut.

When on his usual visit next day Nagrai did not find the bed and Heemal's corpse on the tree he became very sad and commenced a search for them. Ultimately he traced them in the holy man's hut. He was very glad to find her alive once again but as she was asleep he did not want to disturb her. He decided to wait till she woke up. He therefore changed over into a snake and coiled himself up around the bed.

The son of the holy man, who had taken a fancy to Heemal, chanced to come into the room and finding a snake at the foot of Heemal's bed he cut it into bits. The noise awoke Heemal. "Oh what have you done? You have killed my husband, Nagrai," she said to him angrily.

The unfortunate Heemal cremated Nagrai's body on the funeral pyre and herself committed with it.

The holy man was terribly grieved at this double tragedy, for which he felt personally responsible. He went to the



They fell at the feet of Sadhu

cremation ground and with tears overflowing his eyes, collected their ashes and put them in a pot which he placed on a tree. The ashes were to be taken to the holy Ganga for immersion in course of time. He wept bitterly over what had happened.

It so happened that Shiva and Parvati were sitting on a branch of the same tree in the form of two birds. Parvati asked her divine consort the reason of the pious old man's anguish. He told her what had happened. Moved with pity, she pleaded with her lord to do something to assuage his grief. He told her that if some

one threw the pot into the spring at the foot of the tree, the deceased couple would be restored to life.

The old man, who was a great *sadhu* understood what the great god said. He at once took hold of the pot and poured its contents into the spring. Heemal and Nagrai immediately rose up from their ashes. They embraced each other and fell at the feet of the *sadhu* when they learnt how they had once again been restored to life.

Thereafter they lived together happily and in peace and the old man lived with them.

AKANANDUN

Centuries ago there lived a most benevolent king with his capital at Rajapuri. He was kind-hearted and conscientious and ever keen to promote his people's well being.

The noble ruler was blessed with an equally good wife and their solicitude for their subjects had won them their esteem and affection. They regarded them as their parents and would not hesitate to lay down their lives for them if need arose.

God had given the royal couple everything an extensive domain, great riches and a devoted and contented population. But in the midst of their plenty and prosperity they suffered one privation. They had no male child.

The benevolent queen was not barren. She had given birth to a number of children. But unfortunately none of them was a male. Both she and her husband were

deeply worried that they had no son.

Who would inherit their wide domain and their vast riches? Who would perform their obsequies at their death and who would "give them water" after they were no more? And who would continue the family line? These thoughts rankled in their minds day and night.

The king was a god-fearing person who had taken to himself but one wife. Both he and the queen were deeply religious. Both of them embarked upon deeds of piety, prayers and penance to win God's favour in the shape of a son. Numerous *yajnas* and other sacred ceremonies were performed to propitiate the gods to this end. They visited temples and *tirthas* and lavishly distributed charity to Brahmans and beggars. Hundreds of mendicants and needy were fed and clothed in the royal palace every week. But all

their prayers and charity seemed to be in vain.

One day, however, a very

strange type of *jogi* appeared at the royal doorstep. "Alak Niranjana ! Alak Niranjana !" he shouted in a peculiar tone.



The queen at once went down and bowed before the Yogi

The queen asked one of her maidservants to go and find out who it was that had raised the slogan. The maidservant was astonished when she saw the *sadhu* with his ash-smeared body and flowing locks of hair, holding a *trishul* (trident) in one hand and a *kamandalu* (wallet) in another. She rushed back to the queen and said, "It seems great god, Shiva, himself has come to bless you !"

The queen at once went down and bowed before the *jogi* with hands joined in a *namaskar*. "Revered *jogi* ! Name what may it please you to have," the queen said to him in a respectful tone. She instinctively felt that the *jogi* could fulfil her and her husband's wish to have a male child. She had a handful of jewels brought from the palace and with folded hands offered them to him. She placed her head at the *jogi's* feet and said, "Maharaj, God has given us everything—a vast kingdom, great prosperity and a devoted people. But we don't have a son who would succeed to the throne and would continue the family line. O, *jogi* grant us our heart's cherished desire ! Bless us with a male child !"

"May it be so ! A son will I give you but on condition that I

will take him back twelve years after his birth," the *jogi* said in a commanding tone and disappeared from sight.

The king and the queen were very happy at the prospect of having a male child and when the promised baby actually came, after nine months, they were beside themselves with joy. There was great jubilation and rejoicing all over the kingdom. In the capital, Rajapuri, there were illuminations and fire-works, feasts and festivities for a number of days. Sweets were distributed among children and food, clothes and cash were given to the poor and the needy.

The new-born baby was named Akanandun, as the *jogi* had directed. He was tended with all care and brought up in right royal manner. A dozen nurses looked after him and when he was only a few years old a number of tutors were engaged to coach him. To fit him for the onerous duties that he would be called upon to shoulder later in life, he was also sent to school. The king and the queen carefully watched his progress.

Years rolled by quickly and happily till the fateful twelfth year of the

boy's life began to draw to a close. The people remembered the *jogi* and how he had promised the royal couple their favourite child for only twelve years. The whole atmosphere was charged with fear and foreboding. The *jogi* himself suddenly appeared one day and as people saw him they felt that the king and the queen would soon be deprived of their favourite child. The *jogi* has come to claim back Akanandun," whispered the people as they met one another in the streets. The atmosphere was thick with fearful expectation.

When the twelfth year of the prince's life actually came to a close, the *jogi*, went to the palace. "Alak Niranjan ! Alak Niranjan !" he thundered in his strange, resounding tone. A cold shiver ran down the queen's spine when she learnt that the dreaded *jogi* had come to take back Akanandun. Both she and her husband rushed down, fell at the *jogi's* feet and with folded hands begged of him to grace their house.

The *jogi* went in and was offered a seat on the throne itself. But he did not sit. He only wanted fulfilment of the undertaking they had given twelve years

ago ; he wanted his Akanandun back.

"The child has gone to the *pathshale* for studies," said the queen.

"Get him at once ; I have not seen him these twelve years. Get him at once," the *jogi* shouted.

The fond parents earnestly supplicated the *jogi* to dissuade him from his purpose, but of no avail. The queen kissed his feet but he was not moved. All her entreaties and tears were unavailing. The king was prepared to surrender half his kingdom itself but the *jogi* had no use for it. He only wanted his Akanandun back.

"Akanandun", the *jogi* shouted and the handsome youth at once appeared before them. The king and the queen embraced the lad and once again entreated the *jogi* to let him remain with them. They said, "He is the apple of our eyes. He is the mainstay of our lives ; our existence would be impossible without him."

But the *jogi* was stern and unbending. He thundered, "I have to eat him, and," addressing the

king, added, 'you have to kill him and she has to cook his flesh.'

By now there was a crowd of courtiers and others assembled in the palace hall. All of them were horrified at what the *jogi* said. The royal couple begged the *jogi* to take back Akanandun but spare his life. But he was insistent. The king and queen were at first not at all prepared to do the *jogi's* bidding. But there was something in the *jogi's* look and voice that compelled obedience. Spellbound, the king and his wife, most reluctantly proceeded to do the cruel job, weeping and sobbing. The young boy's clothes were taken off; the queen gave him a bath, as the *jogi* commanded. Then handing a butchers' knife to the king, the *jogi* ordered him to kill the boy and hack his body into pieces.

The assembly hall was turned into virtual hell and tears streamed down the face of everyone present. The king and the queen rolled themselves on the floor at the *jogi's* feet and tore away their hair. But the *jogi* was unmoved. He had the young boy hacked into pieces which the queen was made to cook.

When the meat was ready, the *jogi* asked the queen to distribute

it into several freshly baked earthenware bowls for the royal couple, for their other children and for himself. He had an extra bowl kept for Akanandun.

"Wasn't the *jogi* off his head?" every one present wondered. But nobody dared ask any questions; the whole scene was so dreadful, so painful, and the *jogi's* behaviour so strange and inexplicable.

The *jogi* passed on the bowls to those for whom they were meant and turning to the queen, said, 'O, queen, go and call Akanandun. I really cannot relish it without him.'

There was no doubt left in anybody's mind that the *jogi* was off his head. Seeing the queen hesitant to do his bidding, he shouted at her again, "Go, call Akanandun to take his share!"

The queen could not but obey the *jogi's* command. She shouted, "Akanandun! O, my dear Akanandun! come to take your share".

"Coming, dear mother!" replied Akanandun, as he rushed up the staircase.

Everybody was taken by

surprise to see the prince back in flesh and blood. The royal couple hugged and kissed him and in the joyous commotion that followed

Akanandun's re-appearance, the *jogi* disappeared and along with him the cooked meat in the several earthenware bowls.



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